



Translations

"People die when they are killed"

-presents-

Full Metal Panic!

Short Stories

Volume 10

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Translated with the blessings of the Goddesses of Wheat and the Universe, and KRAUSER-SAN!!

[Voice from the North]

Do you believe in God?

If you were to ask me that, I, Andrei Sergeyevich Kalinin, would have no choice but to answer:

"Once I did not, then I think I started to, but at the end lost any reason to."

Born and raised in an atheist society, I then found something I truly loved, then it was taken away from me. This is the kind of person I am.

Do you believe in Fate?

If you were to ask me that, I would answer the opposite:

"Once I did, then I think I stopped to, but now I do, again."

If you think about it, God and Fate are very similar concepts. You could almost say they're the same. So if I have two completely opposite standpoints on these notions, am I contradicting myself? I do not think it is that easy to dismiss. That this world turns around contradictions is an undeniable truth, and it is also one of the things that makes us human.

My subordinates call me a cautious optimist. They consider me to a man of unbreakable will, one of that particular breed - leaders of men, like Captain Testarossa and Commander Mardukas. The kind of people that, no matter how desperate the situation seems, will not fall prey to empty pessimism or wishful thinking, but will tacitly do what has to be done. People like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa. They could all be called "cautious optimists". Although I naturally do not think of myself that way, they believe me to be one of those people.

They are wrong.

The real me, right now, is a person defeated by Fate. Swept by its tremendously powerful current, I barely cling to a withered branch, hanging from the river bank.

Fate...

A terrible storm, one that surpasses human understanding, ready to destroy everything to achieve its arrogant purpose, or perhaps just to create chaos.

That boy must have felt something, too, and started resisting it.

There is something special about my connection with him, although it is possible that I alone can feel it...

* * *

I met him for the first time about thirteen years ago, in the far North, a realm of bitter cold, where nothing could survive, right in the middle of the Arctic Ocean.

It was a time when relations between the United States of America and the Soviet Union were cooling down again after a brief thaw. Despite understanding that their thousands of strategic weapons of mass destruction could obliterate the entire world several times over, the two only escalated their seventy-year-long tug-of-war. The whole world, divided into two camps, became a silent battlefield. This sea, devoid of life, was no exception, often becoming the frontline of the conflict. A cold stage for a cold war, on which an unseen drama was playing out. From a distance, the opponents were always watching this sorrowful struggle on a desolate battlefield. I happened to witness it once.

"K-244" was the name of the warship that I was travelling on, also known as Project 671RTM "Shuka", a nuclear-powered submarine¹, known to the West as Victor-III class.

The boat was a hunter-killer submarine, assigned to patrol duties near US territory. It did not carry nuclear missiles for a direct attack of the American mainland² - its role was to escort the submarines that did, observing and, if necessary, pursuing enemy ships and disabling them with precise strikes.

The K-244 was a new warship, - quiet, fast, unmatched in its detection capabilities, so it was sometimes assigned to special missions, like gathering various intelligence near North American shores. The risk was great, but it was a rather low-key assignment overall.

Slowly moving underwater, it raised an antenna which intercepted communications traffic on both civilian and military channels. It analysed the traces of the daily utilisation of electronic equipment by the US Army, received reports from Soviet spies inside the Pentagon and the NSA, and in return confirmed the reception and appraised them of the current situation. That day's mission seemed to be no different.

This mission lasted only several days, but at other times the submarine would be at sea for months. As someone who was taught everything about Western technological means of communication, and was fluent in a few foreign languages, I was frequently given the opportunity to assist such intelligence-gathering operations.

¹Not to be confused with the Project 971 "Schuka-B"; The Victor-III modification entered service in 1979. It was developed around the same time as the Los Angeles class submarines; still not as quiet as their American counterparts, these attack subs still had the usual advantages of speed, maximum depth, and smaller crew. Interesting fact: in 1975 the Kamov bureau developed a gadget worthy of James Bond movies specifically for this sub: a fold-out one-seat helicopter (Ka-56) that could be fired from the 533-mm torpedo bay of a submerged vessel.

² It could carry the SS-N-21 "Sampson" missile, aka S-10 Granat, which can be outfitted with a nuclear warhead, and has a range around 3000 km.

The K-244 was a modern, but still ordinary submarine, and unlike the "Tuatha De Danaan", was not controlled by an advanced AI and could not reach speeds of fifty knots while remaining completely silent. Being only ten miles from American territorial waters, it was difficult to maintain vigilance and manoeuvre while gathering intelligence, so it was not surprising that changing the position of the antenna sometimes required half a day's worth of manoeuvring.

For me, then a junior officer of the special forces, freshly graduated from a military academy, spending weeks on end reading through files inside a steel cigar ten metres underneath the surface of an icy ocean was decidedly not a pleasant occupation. Waking up inside a boat where no distinction between day and night existed, sorting all the information recorded by the machinery every thirty minutes, carrying on empty discussions with the political officer about party theses. As a junior officer, and on top of that, somebody from the surface, I naturally did not enjoy the comfort of a private room - the only space I had was my bunk on the second level. This routine continued, unbroken, every day.

The little diversions I had were writing letters to my wife back home and reading an anthology of William Blake that I had discreetly brought with me. Of course, I had to bear with the inspection of my private correspondence, but owning the works of Blake, an Englishman, was a grave offense³.

I did have another source of enjoyment - my conversations with the commanding officer of K-244, Commander Sergey Khabarov. Then in his forties, that man had an appetite that was only matched by his good humour. My father's name, evidently, was also Sergey⁴, and we were both from Leningrad⁵ - we talked about that the first day I joined the crew of his warship. His only son went to Afghanistan, where I had been fighting only half a year earlier, so he asked me a lot about the situation on the ground, and I did my best to satisfy his curiosity.

The captain often invited me to share dinner with him, and I had an opportunity to listen to the many stories of his life. As a fresh graduate of the military academy, I was just a cynical young man, but I can say with confidence that my current command style, as a commissioned officer, is the result of everything I learned from him.

That day, too, I was having lunch with the captain. I still remember exactly what we talked about.

It was an idle chat about the gold that, supposedly, the last Russian emperor, Nikolai II, left behind. After the period of chaos that followed the revolution, the figure of Nikolai II became clouded in mystery and baseless rumours, such as the legend that his beautiful daughter alone was not executed with the tsar and his family, and escaped to Germany, or France, or even America, and led a troubled life there. The

³ Historically speaking, this would be a bit of an exaggeration. He would be censured if he was hiding, for example, Mein Kampf, or some work of a dissident author.

⁴ The second name in Russian is the father's name with an "-ich" suffix.

⁵ Official name of St.-Petersburg from 1924 to 1991.

story about the gold went along similar lines: it was said that, just before his execution, Nikolai II entrusted a loyal Leib Guard⁶ with the location of an enormous treasure.

- I swear, it's got to be true, comrade. I'm not joking - this one could be real, - told me Khabarov with a very serious face.

I did not believe in anything like that from the beginning, so I asked him:

- If so, where would this gold be hidden?

As the captain was ready to tell the most interesting part of the story, he was interrupted by a sailor who had just come into the cabin, so I never got the chance to find out where the location of that treasure. From that point on, because of an unexpected turn of events, we did not get a chance to continue our peaceful discussions.

The sailor began whispering something to the captain, but I heard it as well.

- Sir, the sonar reports - contact ten kilometres northeast, something like a large passenger plane which possibly made an emergency landing on the ice, - these words became etched in my memory.

* * *

Afterwards I learned that, more precisely, the location was 11 kilometres north-north-east of our position, on heading zero-three-two.

Nobody found out the exact cause of the crash. Even though I was able to analyse all the communications traffic in this airspace, even I could only guess what happened.

This Boeing 747, flight MUS-113, belonged to Musashi Airlines, the largest airline company in Japan. It was on its usual route from Tokyo International Airport to Anchorage, then London. Those days the planes on most international flights were not able to fly from the Far East to Europe without refuelling.

That time, if my memory serves me well, the atmospheric conditions above the Arctic Ocean were particularly poor, however, it shouldn't have had an impact on a international flight travelling at an altitude of around 12,000 metres. The Western mass media speculated then that the crash was due to maintenance problems, or even a pilot's sudden bout of madness. Even having observed it directly, I was not a crash investigation specialist and thus cannot say whether there was any truth in these hypotheses.

From the transmission records that I could gather, it seemed like up to a certain point there were no problems with flight MUS-113. Then, something unusual happened. Without warning, a fire was

⁶ The Leib Guard is the name of the Russian Imperial Guard (from German "Leib", meaning "body"), founded by Peter the Great.

detected in engine number three, leading to a shutdown of both right-wing engines. The 747's robust design would have normally allowed it to retain its flight capability, but this time luck was against it. Right afterwards the horizontal stabiliser jammed for an unknown reason. Whether it was a blown off wing fragment that hit the tailplane, or damage to the stabiliser's hydraulics system I did not know.

Over the radio I heard the flight 113 pilot's voice, strained, struggling to keep calm and not give in to desperation in the face of inevitable death. I had it all in the recordings. The pilot's name was Horita.

This Horita was later treated by the irresponsible Japanese mass media as the main culprit, the one responsible for the crash, however, his handling of the plane immediately after the accident was nothing short of heroic. Properly speaking, the plane could well have fallen apart in mid-air, and an incompetent pilot certainly could not have performed anything close to an emergency landing in those conditions⁷. Unfortunately, the only person in the whole world who could hear that pilot's voice among the clouds was me, on board the K-244, and all records of the incident, by the decision of the Kremlin, were perpetually sealed away as classified information. As the recovery of the black box later proved impossible, the truth of the accident remained unknown to the world, just as the location of the treasure of Nikolai II to me remained another riddle of history, soon vanishing from sight.

But let us return to the events of that fateful day.

According to the information gathered by myself, along with senior sonar specialists, Flight 113 did in fact land on the surface of the ice. The emergency landing was quite brutal, but in the sonar records there was no trace of a large explosion, and no sound that could indicate the machine penetrating the ice shelf and sinking. On the contrary, there was a distinct possibility of survivors still inside the wreck.

The ice around the crash site was not very thick, and, of course, there was a certain danger of the wreckage sinking, but even more importantly, it was not hard to guess that the harsh weather - a true arctic storm - would soon end the lives of survivors, many of whom may have been injured. They would normally rely on American or Canadian rescue teams, but there was no time to wait for their arrival. Even if the Westerners knew that a passenger plane had crashed in the first place, they would not know the exact location of the crash.

The senior officers of the warship were of the opinion that a rescue operation was necessary. Even if there were no survivors, they should gather as much information as possible.

Only one of them, the political officer, was opposed to it - his job was, after all, to criticise the absurdity of such a decision. K-244 was performing a highly classified intelligence gathering mission, and was supposed not to reveal its presence in this area. Orders forbade communications with North Fleet

⁷ This episode is an obvious (for those who have watched Air Crash Investigation on National Geographic, anyway) reference to Japan Airlines Flight 123. In that accident the plane had lost its vertical stabiliser, but the efforts of the pilots kept it in the air for another half an hour, until it crash-landed on a mountain side - a lot of passengers would have survived, if timely help came. It did not (the JSDF were blamed a lot for this later), and in the end 4 people survived (they were sitting close to the tail), while 520 lost their lives, making it the deadliest single-aircraft accident in history.

Headquarters to ask for instructions. There was not a human soul for hundreds of kilometres around - except for us, the crew of the K-244.

After a heated argument, the captain made his decision: engines ahead full, starboard heading zero-three-zero. He chose to disregard orders from Headquarters and perform the rescue operation. Only later would I learn what this decision meant for his career.

* * *

It took the K-244 almost ninety minutes of manoeuvring to get to that area. Captain Khabarov first stopped the ship precisely under the surface of the icy sea and raised the periscope. I was waiting for orders on the bridge, when he beckoned me to come.

- Take a look, lieutenant.⁸

Saying that, he stepped from the periscope, inviting me to see the crash with my own eyes. The reason he called me was evident: having returned from Afghanistan, I had observed more aircraft accidents than other people on board the vessel. Even though I remembered that this would be my first time looking through a submarine periscope, that thought was not enjoyable.

The scenery that opened before my eyes only confirmed that feeling - leaden skies, snow blowing against cracked ice, and in the middle of it all a black mass seemed to be floating. The clock showed that it was noon, but outside it was almost completely dark.

I did not have any experience operating a periscope, so I asked the captain:

- Where do I set the magnification?

- This switch here, - the captain's finger pointed at the correct selector, and I adjusted the periscope.

The intense storm rendered my vision blurry, but now I could be certain that the dark mass was the wreckage of a passenger plane, a Boeing-747 jumbo jet. There was no fire to be seen. On the side of the fuselage I could make out the letters that spelled "MUSASHI AIRLINES". The plane was torn in half right behind the wings. The forward section was slanted to the right and half-buried in ice, while the tail was lying far apart, approximately four hundred meters back, as far as I could judge. The ice around them appeared to be littered with minor fragments and torn-off engines.

- Unbelievable, - said the captain in a gloomy voice.

⁸ Note that, even though Gato-h-sensei calls Kalinin "sergeant major" everywhere, in reality he should have been most likely a lieutenant, junior grade. Sergeant major is simply too low a rank for an officer of the special forces who graduated from the academy.

- Yes, however, it doesn't look like there's a fire.

- Do you think there are survivors?

The front of the crashed airplane was mangled beyond all recognition, bringing only pessimistic thoughts about the fate of its passengers. The tail section, however, looked more promising. The tail itself was missing, but the rest appeared relatively less damaged, and the passenger cabin remained more or less intact. In the history of aircraft accidents, survivors were most likely to be found in the tail section of the fuselage. In the case of a crash or emergency landing, the shock weakened in the rear, so the likelihood of passengers surviving the initial impact was greater.

I had seen cases like this in Afghanistan. When a Soviet helicopter or transport plane was shot down, by an American-made Stinger missile, for example, it was rare to see pilots, sitting in front of the aircraft, come out alive, while the people closer to the tail would often survive, if barely. Of course, the surviving crew was in most cases immediately taken prisoner by those guerrillas, and met a more gruesome death.

In any case, there was a possibility of there being survivors. I stepped away from the periscope and informed the captain of my opinion.

Khabarov nodded and lowered the periscope, lost in thought for a brief moment, then ordered the submarine to manoeuvre close to the tail of the crashed plane and break surface near it.

- First, we'll search the tail, - said the captain, combing down his hair and putting on his cap. - It's likely a mess inside... I need people who aren't afraid of seeing dead bodies. Would you go?

- Yes, Sir, - I immediately replied.

- A team of four will go first. If it proves to be too dangerous, return immediately.

- Whom shall I take, Sir?

- Your choice. Take two strong crewmen, and an experienced junior officer.

- Yes, Sir, - I saluted and immediately left the bridge.

Having lived on board the vessel for several weeks, I had a rough understanding of the abilities and experience of most members of the crew, so the selection process did not take long.

First of all, Chief Petty Officer Oskin, a member of the engine crew. Oskin came from a family of miners from Sverdlovsk⁹, so he had some experience in mountain climbing, and was generally a very bright and observant young man. Together with two other sailors that I took on his advice, we quickly gathered the necessary equipment and went outside the surfaced K-244.

Even with three people, clad in full arctic suits, getting the dinghy out of the narrow hatch was back-breaking work. Outside raged a terrible snow storm, and I could feel the stinging cold getting through

⁹ Official name of Yekaterinburg from 1924 to 1991.

minute gaps in my protective hood and goggles. In such weather, even a person unharmed by the crash itself likely would not have survived for two hours.

It was very hard just walking from K-244 to the tail of the downed aircraft. The ice underfoot was unsteady, and even Oskin, the last man in the file, was poorly visible in the blizzard. The weather seemed to get worse every minute since I first looked in the periscope.

One of the sailors, realising the same thing, anxiously asked me if it would not be better to turn back. Oskin called him a fool and pushed him forward.

When we came closer, it became clear that the situation of Flight 113 was even worse than initially expected. The freezing wind blew through the passenger cabin through torn sections of the fuselage. The crewman who was walking behind me stumbled on something hard and cursed, but then let out a small cry. The thing he tripped on was the lower half of a body, by now completely frozen. The gruesome state of bodies after an air crash does not need explanation - the fragile human body cannot hope to withstand collisions at several hundred kilometres an hour. It was impossible to remain calm in the face of such utter and merciless destruction. When I was a fresh recruit, I had seen similar, if not more appalling consequences of a high speed crash. Then I vomited, and the images haunted my dreams for years to come. This time, a combination of slapping and yelling by me and Oskin was enough to get the crewman out of his panicked state.

Having spent some time inspecting the surroundings of the wreck, we tied ourselves together with a rope and went inside the passenger cabin through a round hole in the fuselage.

A hellish sight awaited us there.

The seats closer to the front were a ghastly mass of crushed bodies. There was at the very least no smell - we could be grateful for the cold, which quickly froze the bodies. Even so, one of the sailors could not bear the sight and, tearing off his mask, vomited loudly in a corner. Such was the cold that the contents of his stomach almost instantly started congealing on the floor.

Further in the back of the cabin, the motionless passengers looked like they were asleep.

- Nobody could have survived this, - sighed Oskin heavily.

- Doesn't look like anybody did... Should we go check the front half? - I wanted to do everything to get results, if it was at all possible. If there were no survivors, at least the cockpit voice recorder could be a way to justify Khabarov's actions in the face of charges of disobeying the orders of North Fleet HQ and surfacing in this area. Humane reasons alone, unlike in the West, would not be sufficient justification for the politicians of my home country.

However, my flashlight illuminated a world of death and cold, where the only sound was the howling of the wind...

...Or not?

In this realm of death, I had found traces of life not yet extinguished. I had noticed that three of the starboard seats in the very back of the cabin were vacant. There were no in-flight magazines in the seat pockets, two of the seats had their backs down, and there were traces of blood on the third one. This may have meant that several people moved from these seats after the crash.

We searched the cabin again, trying to shout over the wind - "Is someone there?!". There was no answer. Even then we did not give up and started searching the cargo hold under the cabin. The hold was twisted beyond recognition from the terrible crash, and even though it was sometimes too narrow for us, in thick clothing, we somehow cut our way through with hatchets and hydraulic rams.

- Comrade... do you feel it?..

- Yes. Almost no wind there.

This compartment, full of dislodged containers, was sheltered from the wind. Even so, it was effectively a freezer, with a temperature close to minus twenty degrees.

And they were inside: a man, woman and child, huddled together under a blanket and such a thick pile of clothes, that their shapes did not even look human.

It was already too late for the man, an Asian in his twenties. He had suffered a serious wound to the abdomen and lost a lot of blood. Impossible to say what killed him sooner - the bleeding or hypothermia. He was probably dragged here by his companions to protect him from the cold. The Asian woman and child were still breathing. We never found out if they were his family, or just happened to be sitting next to him, but they were clinging to him desperately, as if trying to protect his body.

The beautiful young woman seemed to be around the same age as the man, whose body was already cold.

I asked her in English if she was all right, to which she only answered: "Save my baby... please..."

Judging by her accent, she was Japanese, so I answered in her mother tongue: "Yes, I have come to rescue you."

After I joined the special forces, I took several language classes at the GRU¹⁰, Japanese being one of them. I also had worked for a year in the Soviet embassy in Tokyo, handling mostly illegal activities. There I was taught by a KGB agent who mastered the language, and my pronunciation became very close to that of a native speaker, but my vocabulary was somewhat formal, so with my way of speaking, and a habit of repeating affirmatives, I sounded like a soldier on parade.

- Yes. We have come to rescue you both.

She breathed a sigh of relief, even though I was speaking strangely. She handed me the baby, weakened by the intense cold, and said again, in Japanese: "Save him... please..."

¹⁰ The Main Intelligence Directorate, the largest foreign intelligence agency of the Soviet Union and Russia.

The child was four or five years old. I thought at first that it was a girl, but now I could see that I was wrong. Gripping a stuffed toy that looked like a fat mouse in a bowler hat, the boy uneasily looked at me and Oskin.

- It's all right, boy. Let me take you to a warm place, - said Oskin in Russian, and took the child as he was, wrapped in a blanket.

The boy suddenly started crying for his mother and struggling to free himself from Oskin's arms. Despite her weakness, she managed to keep her voice firm and steady as she said to her child: "Don't cry... Go!". The Japanese language is difficult, but on occasions displays an surprising depth and power. Then, as she said these words, she could have well meant to say - "Live!"¹¹. I don't know which one it was - probably, both.

At that moment, a sound reached my ears. At first, it was like the popping of bubbles in a fizzy drink. I thought that it was no more than the environment playing tricks with my perception, and that the faint sound was imaginary. But before long, it became much louder and closer, like the roar of applause in a concert hall.

The ice was breaking up, and the machine was about to sink.

Even with such low temperatures, the ice could not support the weight of the plane for much longer. We did not have a moment to lose. In the narrow hold, an adult alone had difficulty moving; leading the passenger through it was going to be even harder.

As the hold was beginning to incline downwards, three of us began to pull the woman up with the rope we brought, while Oskin was crawling out by himself, with the child. Meanwhile, the roaring sound grew closer. The ceiling split with a crack, and the plane began to sink into the freezing ocean. Bolts were snapping with a strange sound. Crawling, staggering, almost falling down on a few occasions, we managed to escape the sinking aircraft. But we could not rest safe on the swaying ice. If it broke underneath our feet, we would be dragged in together with the plane.

My fears proved to be true. I let Oskin go first, with the child, and along with another sailor, was helping the woman. We were preparing to jump across a crack in the ice, when the block of ice on which we were standing suddenly bucked underneath us, splitting in half. I will never forget that devilish shriek - the sound of the machine dragging us into the darkness together with it.

I barely managed to thrust my ice axe into the block, narrowly avoiding a fall into the dark chasm. However, the sailor and the woman were not so fortunate. They both slid into the chasm and gulped down a lot of icy seawater. The sailor panicked and frantically shouted something - I could make out what, since his native language was Ukrainian. The woman did not have any strength left to scream, so she just raised her eyes and look helplessly at me. I still remember that look as if it happened today.

If I held out my hand, I could still help one of them. But only one.

¹¹ "Ikinasai", depending on what kanji you use, can be interpreted as "go" or "live".

In the dim light, my vision blurred, I could not see the faces of my companions, but I knew I had three seconds at most to help them. Only three seconds...

At the end, I caught the sailor's hand. He was closer to me, only two feet away. He was a young man, barely twenty years old, and he had no connection with this accident. He had a family to return to, back home. The woman, on the other hand, had suffered a heavy blow to the abdomen, and judging by the symptoms, her internal organs might have been severely damaged, and she was already suffering from hypothermia. If I had decided to sacrifice the sailor for her sake, it was questionable whether the medical facilities on board the submarine were enough to save her life.

I had made my choice.

I somehow managed to grab the struggling crewman's sleeve, and over his shoulder saw the woman. She was being sucked into the great, black maw of seawater and broken ice, and she did not even have any strength left to scream - her face never showed a hint of terror or despair. Calmly accepting her fate, she was slipping into eternal darkness - and at that fleeting moment, she was surreally beautiful.

She did not look at me - her face was turned towards Oskin, and the child in his arms. Her pale, lifeless lips seemed to say one last word, which I thought was - "Fight". Then the darkness swallowed her completely, and she disappeared from sight.

- Comrade! Quick!! - were shouting Oskin and the other crewmen, throwing me a rope.

Up until then I did not even realise the danger that my own life was in. Without losing a second, we ran from the funereal wreckage. I could not even see the shape of the sinking plane, but I do remember the sound it made. To me then it seemed like behind us a great, malevolent spirit from the underworld was cursing us in its terrible, thunderous voice.

* * *

At the end, we did not get to search the front half of the plane. With a tremendous rumble, it sank into the Arctic Ocean while we were carrying the lone survivor back to K-244.

When we got back inside the submarine, I handed the child over to the ship's medical officer and could finally take off my heavy arctic outfit.

Our spirits were low because we could not save the boy's mother, and our bodies were fatigued and frozen. The sailor, whom I saved instead of the woman, was then in a state of light shock, and was muttering incoherently and sobbing on my shoulder, blaming himself for what had occurred: "You saved me but... I should've died instead... we abandoned her..."

I was possibly the least suitable person on the ship for consoling him, so I whispered to Oskin to take care of him, and went to the next compartment. Near the medical office I met captain Khabarov, who looked at me intensely and said:

- What was left of that plane is already at the bottom, - saying that, he thrust into my arms a bottle of vodka he was carrying. - Drink. You look like a dead man.

- Yes, Sir, - I took the bottle and took a large mouthful. The liquid burned in my throat, then pleasantly warmed my stomach, and I finally let out a sigh. - We could only save one.

- One is enough. You did good, - the captain clapped me on the back.

- What's the condition of the child?

- Ah, you can come see that for yourself. Shall we?

- Yes, Sir.

We came inside, and I quietly listened to what the medical officer said. The child apparently only had light frostbite, and there was no danger of him losing fingers from it. He was now sleeping peacefully in the back.

- Is he Japanese?

- Most probably.

- Who is he?

The medical officer shrugged, and looked at me.

- Would you take a look at his belongings? - he asked, nodding towards the boy's clothes and his toy that were laid out on his desk. - That's all he had.

The clothes were cut during his treatment, and were now almost unrecognisable. Upon further inspection, I found a tag on the lining on his shorts, with a name, written with a felt-tip pen most likely by the child himself, in hiragana.

It read "Sagara Sousuke".

That name was all he had left.

* * *

Two days later K-244 turned back towards its home port, and the Headquarters of the North Fleet. There was some anxiety over the Party's judgment on the rescue operation, conducted in violation of orders, but otherwise, the voyage was calm and uneventful. Once, the sonar reported that one of the

new British submarines¹² was pursuing us. That was the usual game. It abandoned its pursuit when we were getting close to the Barents Sea, returning to the waters near the Svalbard archipelago. Apparently it had detected the sortie of another new warship of ours, but that information had been classified. I learned later that the new warship sank because of an "accident".

In any case, I, as the only person who could speak Japanese on board the warship, together with the ship's medical officer, took care of the child, tried to talk to him and get him to open up to us. At first, he almost never replied to me - quite understandable, considering he had just been through the terrifying experience of a plane crash and was probably in shock.

He only started talking to me on the fourth day after the dramatic rescue. I was, as usual, trying to draw some kind of reaction from him, saying things that are usual in these cases. "Are you hungry? Do you want something? You'll be home soon, you know. Don't worry."

Sagara Sousuke did not answer, in spite of my efforts. I remember shaking my head, giving up on him momentarily, and going to sit on a chair on the opposite side of the medical office. However, I had been going through newly intercepted communications all night, and was somewhat exhausted. Possibly because of that, I slipped on the wet floor of the office, and fell, clinging to a nearby table and overturning it. I must have seemed quite comical to an onlooker.

However, Sagara Sousuke did not laugh. His shoulders dropped a little, he fixed me with a serious gaze and asked:

- Are you hurt, mister?

- Ah, no, I'm all right, - I answered, getting up, surprised a little at the way he said it.

I've tried to ask him if he was all right, but he only said:

- Where's mom?

I opened my mouth, but words failed me. Just how is it proper to tell him something like that - I did not know.

- Ah, your mother...

- Is she dead?

Silence fell and lasted for a very long, tense minute. At the end, I did not know what to do, so I answered him honestly.

- Yes. She passed away. My condolences.

He immediately started to cry, hugging his old plush toy tightly. It was his own way of coping with the weight of my words.

¹² Which then would most likely be one of the Trafalgar-class subs.

- I'll die too... mommy... - he mumbled after a while, weeping.

I could not do anything except stand there, looking at the floor. I could not think of anything to say, even the most common words of consolation escaped me. I could not even tell him that "your mother had to go far away"...

In retrospect, I believe that my decision was unavoidable. I had no other options. But this small child's tears cast a shadow of doubt over me. I could have done more. I constantly blamed myself for not doing enough afterwards, and I always felt that I owed him something I could never truly repay. He, of course, had no idea about it.

Up until now, I have still not been able to bring myself to tell him what happened that day, and he does not know that I was there.

Call me a dishonest person, and I will agree, but I cannot say it.

People misjudge me. Even being a soldier, a commander, with all my training and experience, I am still too weak to say it.

* * *

Nevertheless, I spent a lot of time with him on the way back to port. The block where he had lived, the dishes his mother prepared, the cats that lived nearby - he told me a lot of different things about his life. I could not understand exactly what city he lived in, and where his home was, but I could feel that he had always been deeply loved and cared for by both parents. I was already calling him "Sousuke-kun", while he called me "An-oji-san". Considering our current relationship, I find it even humorous. I'm sure that he, being a small child at the time, doesn't remember most of our conversations.

Sousuke refused to part with his plush toy. Just before entering port, I teased him, saying that he "looks like a girl" with it.

He still did not go of the toy, scowled and said:

- It's all right. This will protect me.

I have always believed that people are moulded by their experiences of life after birth, but he at least seemed to be born for a virtuous existence. Perhaps he would not become strong, and he would fear conflict and violence; no matter, for one thing was certain, - Sagara Sousuke was exceptionally gentle and kind.

* * *

When K-244 came back to her home port, my mission was technically over. However, I was ordered to stay inside the docked submarine, together with her entire crew. Only captain Khabarov was summoned to the Headquarters. While the captain was away, an officer with an escort of sailors came to take away Sagara Sousuke. That KGB officer, evidently proficient in Japanese, told Sousuke to come with him in a soft, coaxing voice. I did not have any authority to stop him, of course, and besides, I was disciplined by the Party and the army, and believed that nothing bad could happen to him. I waved my hand then, smiled, and told the nervous child: "It's all right. Be safe," and sent him off.

Captain Khabarov never returned to the K-244. Moreover, I have never seen him again.

On the second day of standing by in port, I was taken out by the same, extremely similar-looking people, who took Khabarov, and saw the lead-coloured sky above the harbour again. In the headquarters I was subjected to a rigorous interrogation. Barely allowing me a moment's sleep, officers who did not tell me their names were continuously asking me the same questions, over and over.

What was your original mission?

Why did you abandon that mission?

Who inside the ship approved it?

What did the captain say at that time?

How did he argue with the political officer?

Were there really no other survivors?

Why did you not object to the captain's idea?

Did you not think for a second that this is an act of high treason?

Judging by the way the interrogation was going, Khabarov must have taken all the blame, saying that it was his own judgement, and that the crew and Kalinin had nothing to do with it. I continued to give vague answers, and was let go after three days. My interrogation training instructor back in the Spetsnaz¹³ was much more severe.

All said and done, we did not get any praise for rescuing even one survivor. Instead, the crew of the K-244 received a similar treatment, and most were in shock afterwards.

¹³ Spetsnaz - special forces (in Russian).

We heard that Commander Khabarov was relieved of his post and sent to the Far Eastern fleet, but in reality I don't think that was the case. He was probably sent to live the rest of his life somewhere in Siberia's harsh wastes.

When I returned to my home in Leningrad, enduring my wife's usual sarcastic remarks, I started to assemble any news that I could. The Soviet government was not about to declare that one of their submarines was present at the scene of the accident. The crew were given an order not to disclose any information on it, - the K-244 never left port, and of course, the existence of Sagara Sousuke was not reported anywhere. Later, when I got my hands onto a Japanese newspaper from the time of the accident, I looked for his name among the deceased. Strangely, there were no passengers with the name "Sagara" on board. His parents may have been divorced, or he might have been an illegitimate child. Even if the name on those clothes was wrong, the little boy never corrected me.

This situation puzzled me, and I thought that the little passenger called "Sagara Sousuke" could not have been alone - but finding family members proved impossible (when I finally set foot in Japan as a free man, that accident was already forgotten).

For all intents and purposes, the boy was dead, for the political convenience of a superpower, and for a very long time I had no way of knowing what happened to him afterwards. I only got my first clue four years later. Going back to the Afghan front again, I was talking to an acquaintance from the KGB, who told me about one of their special sections, where their operatives assembled foreign children and raised them as assassins. It was called "Knife"¹⁴ - I do not know whether that was the official name, or an informal designation; that officer told me he had seen a Japanese child in the training school of that section. He had apparently been brought in four years ago by a KGB officer with close ties to the Navy, being now around eight years old, and showed excellent results.

That was enough for me to understand: the motherland I had hitherto unquestionably believed in took this frail, tender boy that I remembered so well, and turned him into an assassin.

* * * * *

In Afghanistan I had participated in three major stages of the war, broadly speaking. First was the prelude to the invasion.

That time I was attached to the force whose task was to assassinate President Amin, and I was part of the teams that secured the presidential residence. Then I had faith that I was doing a sacred duty for my country.

¹⁴ Katakana reads "Nozh", which is the Russian word for "knife".

The second time was a year before my mission on the K-244. As a junior officer of the special forces, I had several subordinates under my command, and was tasked with search-and-destroy operations against guerrillas in the north-eastern part of the country. At that time, the mujahedeen, - the jihadists opposing the pro-Soviet government and Soviet Army, - were turning into serious, experienced opponents, steeled by their terrible losses. They had been only a crowd of poorly armed people who barely knew how to hold a gun, but over the years, they became an experienced fighting force, a fearsome opponent.

The third time would be during the new invasion of Afghanistan, that was liberated from occupation only a short time before.

After the incident on the K-244, I had been restricted to paperwork. There was always a shortage of capable men, who knew the area and had plenty of training and experience, on the ground, but I did not participate Party meetings with any enthusiasm, - that was probably the reason why I still was not a major by then.

Three years flew by, and it was finally decided that I was to be transferred to active duty on the ground. During those three years I was promoted to captain. Usually I would get command of a company of around one hundred people, but my unit was a special assault, reconnaissance and sabotage force, so in reality I took command of the equivalent of a platoon.

I did not forget about the boy I saved while on the K-244, who was raised into an assassin, and even while preparing for my third departure to the front, every day I was continuing my investigation of his fate. The words of the KGB officer were not enough. While in hell that was front line, ensuring the safety of my subordinates would be my first priority, and I surely would not be able to interfere in any way with a secret, inhuman project that my country was conducting.

Yes - by then Afghanistan became hell, once again.

"Liberating" it from the former government, labelled corrupt and depraved, we, the Soviet Army, met tough opposition from the jihadist guerrillas, fighting against atheist rule. It would take too long to describe the vigour, daring and relentlessness, with which they fought. They were admirable as soldiers, with great endurance, that could at times inspire fear. They only had old rifles, but they knew ways to outsmart our modern equipment. On bread and water alone, they managed to walk through tens of kilometres of rugged mountains. They did not fear death, and faced many enemies - that is, Soviet soldiers - alone, believing that their purpose was to kill them for Allah, and in the most cruel way possible.

Many died then.

With our operations, we saved a lot of comrades, but I still had to write several dozen letters of condolence to the families of those we lost. Nevertheless, my subordinates admired me as a reliable commander, and followed without question. In the eyes of the new recruits, I probably was an unyielding, stern veteran. Looking at our results, I might have seemed worthy of such an appraisal. Soon,

even among the fearless jihadists in that area, my unit became well-known, and they started to be much more cautious when fighting us.

However... I remember that during that war I grew weary of life itself. My previously light hair, close to platinum blond, soon became a dead, ashen grey. When did it happen? I could not tell.

Then there was my wife, Irina Kalinina. By then she was a well-known violin player, and possibly because of her numerous travels and performances abroad, she was becoming a refined woman - intelligent, with a sense of humour, she was a romantic at heart and loved children above all. We met in our early twenties, and I remember clearly that we fell in love on the first day, and married the same year. Above all, she wished for a child, but neither I, nor her occupation permitted it. She was touring the planet, giving performances all over the world, and I was, in my own way, also touring the planet, on a mission that did not allow for thoughts about family. As a married couple we rarely met, and when I came back home, she obviously could not be there, waiting for me.

Sometimes, as a husband, I accompanied her abroad on performances, but in fact it was an excuse for another mission from the GRU. Contacting a local agent or installing some transmission equipment - they were simple and discreet missions, but my wife considered that I was making "vague excuses" and scolded me for it. When I went back to the front, we continued to exchange letters, but she knew my personality too well, and rightly guessed that I would be annoyed if I had to write every day. When she saw words like "a safe mission" in my letters, Irina immediately knew that it was not the case. I was indeed lying, because the mission was far from safe.

Despite all of this, I thought that everything would somehow work out.

* * *

At the end, the Soviet Army emerged completely victorious from the conflict in Afghanistan, but then it was often called "the Soviets' Vietnam War". The fighting was hard for the Soviet Army, the end was nowhere in sight and victory looked very improbable. By then I had, of course, understood, that this was an aggression based on pure geopolitical motifs, but even so I still believed in fighting my country's cause. Realising that this belief was also futile and starting to see my own country with suspicion and distrust would not take much longer. Going there for the third time, as a commander, I could understand the purpose of this war even less.

Afghanistan is an area covered by steep mountains, so friendly support vehicles and armour could only move on narrow, unpaved roads, that were winding through the mountains. It is unnecessary to explain to a person with even the most basic training that it was extremely easy, just by laying mines on a road like that, to create a perfect ambush. Likewise, there is no point in explaining the difficulty of detecting the enemy guerrillas, who were using geographical features and the cover of night to move and get closer to allied defensive positions.

The "Hind" attack helicopters were effective in countering the guerrillas, they were vulnerable to the "Stinger" Man-Portable Air-Defence System that America had started supplying them with, and their operation capabilities were severely limited by weather, so they were far from an ideal solution. Against able guerrillas, making use of terrain to lay ambushes and striking day and night, an ordinarily equipped army was simply vulnerable. With no break in this deadlock in the foreseeable future, the men of the Soviet Army were getting weary.

However, that break came when the newly introduced "Arm Slave" machines first walked on the field of battle.

We had been hearing rumours about new machines for around half a year already, when the first, brand new Arm Slave, called "Livenj"¹⁵, was deployed in our regiment. The NATO codename for this machine was Rk-91 "Savage". It was, of course, somewhat slower than modern AS types, but compared to a regular infantryman it was almost invincible. At the beginning, me and most other officers were sceptical about its capabilities and battlefield performance, but after a couple of weeks of field tests, we began to recognise its worth.

It is well-known that the AS is a walking armoured combat vehicle, whose form imitates that of a human. Tougher and better armed than an attack helicopter, with an exceptional manoeuvrability that allowed it to pass through any kind of terrain, this human-like weapon was the perfect solution to our problems. It was the perfect weapon for clearing out the guerrillas with their outdated equipment.

I spent my days ensuring coordination between the existing reconnaissance force and the AS unit, and working out successful anti-guerrilla tactics. This work immediately bore fruit: in just one month we doubled the area we controlled in the region, and friendly losses decreased drastically.

For the enemy it must've been a drastic turn for the worse. My enemy at the time was the reputedly invincible general Majeed, who commanded the guerrillas on the Panjsher plateau, the heart of the Badakhshan region¹⁶. The guerrilla force of the man called the "Tiger of Badakhshan" was known even among other Afghan insurgents not only for their powerful leadership, but also for their unusually merciful treatment of prisoners of war. As a professional soldier, despite fighting against them, I had always admired and respected their boldness and fortitude.

This was the enemy that the AS unit under my command was busy exterminating. It was not a pleasant task, but one that had to be done to reduce possible allied casualties in the region. I did not have any other options, and I could not use my own discretion in this case.

In that seemingly endless darkness of war, there were few moments when light shone on me, however, I do remember the one joyful event that happened in my family: Irina was blessed with a child. When I

¹⁵ The katakana seems to spell out that word, which actually means "rain shower" in Russian. The kanji mean "Storm" or "Gale" though. Sounds more like the name of an MLRS system, similar to the famous "Katyusha", of which the BM21 version is called "Grad", or "Hail".

¹⁶ Thus general Majid, the "Tiger of Badakhshan" is definitely Gato's version of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Lion of Panjsher.

got her letter, two months after returning home for a short leave, I started believing that this was a turning point, that everything was going to be better from now on. I only had to concentrate on the mission ahead, ensure the triumph of my country in this war, and return immediately afterwards. I would survive, and return home - this was now not as difficult as before. I had to do it...

* * *

I heard about it first from my adjutant, Lieutenant Krivenko, the week after the letter from my wife reached me. A similar mixed platoon of our regiment, while attempting to capture the suburb of a nearby town, was completely wiped out by an enemy counterattack. They had apparently used an Arm Slave. I could not believe my ears.

There was no previous record of a guerrilla unit operating AS-type vehicles, and no intelligence reports. My first thought was that the American government supplied that AS to the guerrillas. However, the most advanced weapon they had hitherto sent them were the Stinger missiles. Could they offer an AS? Taking into consideration all expenses and logistical problems, such a plan would be too complicated, and I had concluded that it was impossible.

When I went to see the scene of the battle, I could immediately say that, judging by the footprints and used ammunition type, it was not an American AS. The enemy was using one of our own "Savages" against us, probably stolen from somewhere because of incompetence on our part.

Having thoroughly observed its footprints, I could conclude that its pilot was still handling it somewhat unskilfully. There were some useless steps, an inefficient movement pattern, and several traces of it falling down by itself could be found. The pilot also wasted too many bullets.

However, there was only one reason why our damaged machine was taken away.

- They've taken it for parts, I bet, - remarked my aide, Lt. Krivenko, - Sly bastards'll use it to repair theirs.

There were three other abandoned "Savage" wrecks in the area. One stepped on a mine and was subsequently destroyed by an anti-tank missile, another had serious problems with its powerplant and was abandoned on the battlefield. If they transported the third one by truck and dismantled it, with its working parts they could very well build one machine in perfect condition. Of course, I did not think that there was an AS specialist in the enemy ranks, however, there was a possibility of one of them being a student of an engineering college or a technician before the civil war.

Guerrillas capturing and seizing a new weapon that confused even trained military technicians? Yes, it was hard to believe at first, but facts seemed to point to that conclusion. The foolishness of the top-level officers, who dismissed them as illiterate savages, was apparent. On the contrary, they combined the traditional wisdom of the elders with the necessary amount of scientific knowledge.

If this was not the case, they would not have been able to use the Stingers so effectively against Soviet helicopters and transports. Taking into consideration the weather and movement patterns of the aircraft, as well as the special properties of infra-red rays in the atmosphere, they sent the missiles away with their usual "Allah akbar". It was, of course, a sign of their faith, not just a nonsensical utterance because of superstition.

The guerrillas had sufficient education - they just did not possess sufficient equipment. It was the only difference with the "modern army" we trusted in.

It took our army quite some time to realise that fact. Despite my warnings, Headquarters still continued to use regular tactics against them, and we suffered unnecessary losses. The AS that was assigned to the mopping up operation was ambushed and destroyed by an enemy AS of the same type, and the defenceless infantry were quickly overrun. That is why I went to see the scene for myself. I had a feeling that soon the number of useless movements and fired bullets would decrease, as the pilot's skill improved. This time he had used a river or a paved road to escape, to avoid detection of his footprints. He was already improving.

This pilot has just received valuable combat experience. This was a new machine. Even our own pilots did not have much experience with it, and now they were fighting against an enemy of about the same skill. No, rather, the enemy had an advantage - he knew the terrain like no other, and had admirably coordinated his actions with his fellow infantry - he would have been destroyed alone.

It did not take much to imagine that this enemy might soon become beyond our control.

I had received an order to destroy that AS immediately, and was moved out to the Panjsher plateau with three Savages, two infantry platoons and two Hinds. At the time of that mopping-up operation, I was introduced by our local informant to a certain man. He was an Asian mercenary, working here, in Afghanistan, as an instructor in a training camp for anti-imperialist combatants from all over the globe. His name was Gauron. "Anti-imperialist combatants" was, of course, a pretty name for terrorist group members, that would later carry out their attacks in the West, and the training facilities were supported from the very beginning by the KGB.

From the very beginning I had taken a dislike to that Gauron. He viewed such Western concepts as civilisation and humanism with scorn and disgust. We were not pleased that a suspicious training facility for terrorists was operated under our noses, in the middle of our war. Gauron's men also sometimes started fights with guerrillas on their own, calling it "practice". When I pointed that out, he gave me a gloomy smile, and answered in fluent Russian: "Hey, now, we're only helping you a little with... pest extermination. You should be a little more grateful, captain."

His unpleasant countenance notwithstanding, I was forced to admit that he was a more than capable soldier. He was - yes, like a lion. When you were fooled by his seemingly languid appearance, he would suddenly display his determined and violent nature. He was unusually large for an Asian man, quick-witted, devilishly cunning; his piercing gaze seemed to read all the weaknesses of human nature in his

opponent. It was almost impossible to make him yield, and indeed, I would later fight him time and again, and would not be able to defeat him completely.

On the first day after coming there, Gauron left without notice and came back with three people he captured. When I censured him for his arbitrary conduct, he casually shot one of those three, who looked like their leader. He pointed another handgun at Lieutenant Krivenko, who tried to restrain him, and shot another prisoner, then proceeded to swiftly extract intelligence from the already sobbing third man, the most faint-hearted of them all.

- Sorry, captain. But it did save us time, right? Well, don't forget to clean up, - said Gauron, killing the last man after his business with him was done, then turning away and casually leaving.

These were entirely rational, but quite unpleasant methods. However, my real first confrontation with Gauron would come later. That time, we would not be on the same, Soviet side any more.

- Ah, yes, - he said before leaving, turning his head to me, - about that guerrilla AS. You should capture the pilot alive. I'll show you something even more interesting then.

* * *

Despite these complications, the information extracted by Gauron proved to be quite important. We could understand the deployment of guerrilla forces, as well as the number of their AS machines. There was still only one. Even though we had been considering the possibility that the enemy had captured three Arm Slaves, it proved to be a false assumption. At first it looked like they kept them away from combat, and used them for training purposes. The enemy also had very limited fuel and ammunition.

I instantly devised a complex operation to trap the enemy. We did not have complete knowledge of terrain or weather conditions, but there was no one more experienced than my own subordinates. The attack helicopters would attack the enemy from the front and pin them down; the infantry would also devote itself to tying up the enemy in combat. My aim was to leave the enemy AS without support. With proper preparations, our own AS would take it down without any problems.

It was one evening in late autumn. Winter, which was approaching fast, would render both armies' operations more difficult.

As dusk set in, guerrillas started their approach, using the cover of darkness. The enemy, being very skilful, usually moved in two or three groups, and only after reading our intentions. Even so, making preparations against a fourth group was an easy matter.

Before long, the enemy AS appeared near a designated rock face, and the AS platoon, under my personal command, began the attack. The twilight calm was ripped apart by the growl of engines, and

the roar of our guns drowned even the howl of the cold wind. Despite this perfectly executed ambush, the enemy AS calmly executed an evasive manoeuvre and tried to counterattack. Moreover, he used the loose ground to create a landslide that immobilised one allied AS, shot a second in the engine, and only the third one, already half-damaged, managed to cause sufficient damage to the enemy machine, and it stopped moving.

Despite Gauron's recommendation, I did not give any orders to capture the pilot alive - there was simply no room for going easy on him. That he did survive was the result of his own actions. Then there was the fact that as soon as the enemy AS fell, our own suddenly lost his offensive capability... whether that was simple luck, I do not know.

The pilot of the downed AS was shooting back at us from the cover of his machine with his rifle. When he ran out of ammunition, he switched to his handgun. He must have realised that he had been completely surrounded...

At the end, I led several experienced officers to the wreckage of the AS and captured him. Even now I am unable to describe my astonishment at discovering who was lying behind his wrecked AS and shooting his pistol at us. It was a very young Oriental boy, approximately ten years old. This would be enough to surprise any soldier, but that was not all. Five years had passed, but I instantly understood who was before me. Perhaps it was his face, or other distinct features, or maybe even unexplainable intuition, but I immediately knew - the child was Sagara Sousuke. Rescued in the Arctic Ocean and then made into an assassin - this was the boy from K-244.

And - oh, God. His eyes, - the eyes of that gentle child whom I remembered so vividly, sitting on the bed in the submarine's medical office and clutching to that old plush toy, - were now the cold, emotionless eyes of a killer.

* * *

I cannot imagine what suffering he went through. He was no longer holding his toy, which would "protect him", as he told me then - instead, he gripped tightly an AK rifle, still hot from the shots it fired.

We restrained the boy and took him back to the base. During that time, like a beast, sensing an opportunity, he tried to escape several times, and had to be forcibly subdued.

Upon returning to the base, and finishing my report to the regimental commander, I went to the interrogation room, where he waited, and began questioning. I ordered all my subordinates outside, but even when we were alone, the boy kept silent.

- I am captain Andrei Kalinin. What is your name?

He did not answer. He only stared at me with a sullen look. The light that came from the small, barred window, illuminated him, and made eerie shadows dance on his face.

- Sagara Sousuke, - as I pronounced this name, for the first time his face began to show signs of surprise.

- Am I wrong?

- My friends call me Kassim¹⁷, - he finally said. - Nobody knows that other name.

- Think again. I also have friends from the KGB, - hearing this, his eyes became extremely alert. - The special training program of child assassins - "Knife". That is where you are from, aren't you?.. Then why are you fighting alongside the enemies of the Soviet Union?

He did not answer.

- It can't simply be desertion, can it. Then... a mission? To kill commander Majeed, you'd have to get close to him first. Am I wrong?

I did not need to hear his answer. At that point in time I could already make a quite informed guess, and as I later learned, my guess was right.

The Soviet Command did not know how to combat the fierce resistance of the guerrilla unit led by commander Majeed, so the upper echelons of command together with the KGB decided to surgically remove the leader - that much I could gather. In other words, assassinate him.

He was probably sent here to perform that assassination. The reason why an Asian was chosen to perform a mission in Afghanistan was very simple - his results were excellent, and he could hide among a minor group of Khazars in Majeed's camp. It was known that Majeed, despite being Tajik himself, welcomed and cared after women and children of other ethnicities.

Sousuke probably attempted the assassination, but failed. Majeed was known for his compassion, and it was very likely that he showed it in Sousuke's case, making this young assassin a trusted subordinate, and thus getting him to help the guerrillas.

However - why did he not keep him away from this cruel war, together with the other women and children? It would be logical, if he felt compassion towards the boy. I did not understand that at the time, but I do now. Having met him much later, in Mithril, thinking along the same lines as Majeed, I treated him the same way. So why? To put it plainly, it was a question of adaptation.

Faced with constant danger and high stress, not even the bravest man would remain unchanged. Adapting to the abnormal state of things called "war", the mentality of a person would be remoulded by it.

The first sign of change was an indifference to the person's own existence. Soon, the person would passively react even to the thought of his or her own death. No matter what crisis that person would

¹⁷ He could also be Qasim, but "Kassim" apparently means "divided", which sounds somewhat more appropriate.

experience, they would pragmatically observe the situation and behave accordingly, and because of this, no matter how cynical it may sound, the likelihood of their survival increased.

There were also other people, who believed from the beginning that they could not die. These were the most heroic individuals, often, as I can say from experience, blessed with incredible luck. This kind of people, however, could not understand the fears and fragility of their companions, and often lacked imagination. They were also unable to display strength of will in times of real crisis, instead abandoning all reason and logic, and finding a heroic death on the battlefield, - and often taking their subordinates and companions with them.

There were also those who firmly believed in sacrifice for a great cause, an ideology, or a deity. They truly did not fear death. Some became mindless religious fanatics, others found a peace of mind in zeal and righteousness.

Apart from those, I saw other adaptation patterns, but these three were the most prevalent. When I came to Mithril, the people around me at first glance seemed to belong to the type that forsakes their own life. I was one of them, together with Sagara Sousuke. He, however, took that concept too far.

A regular soldier, in conditions where his safety was assured, could become an ordinary person again. They would eat, drink, laugh, sing, flirt with women, and enjoy the peaceful life. He could not return to that. Perhaps it was because his mind was strained and brought to its limits from early childhood by the constant stress, but the fact was, that he did not know the way back to peace.

This kind of mental affliction was quite widespread among veterans of many wars, and the symptoms manifested themselves most acutely in the best of them. I also had a similar problem, though not as grave.

He was always prepared for battle. Even when there was obviously no danger, he sensed non-existing threats. An ordinary person cannot imagine that, just as it is hard to adapt to danger, it is also hard to adapt to peace. Among people in a peaceful society this would become a problem, for they would ostracise the person, treat them as mentally ill, and the person would usually continue to live in seclusion.

When he joined Mithril by chance, I could have given him a much safer duty. I could have thought that if he was left to tinker with the written off machinery in the disposal department, it would entice him to slowly forget about being a soldier. I was not as thick-headed as to not understand that he was only a sixteen year old boy, who was made to kill people, and feel nothing while doing it. However, I also understood that if he was suddenly switched to a completely safe duty, it would not produce any significant results, for the reasons I already mentioned.

And then she appeared. Chidori Kaname.

This had the appearance of a mission, but was also an opportunity to attend a normal Japanese school, adapt to local life, with minimum stress. Of course, I assumed it would cause some trouble for the locals,

but if he learned to adapt to peace, surely a life between his school and his unit was a small price to pay?

My plan turned out to be more successful than expected. Already half a year later he would say that he wanted to attend school on his own accord. He was finally becoming an ordinary young man.

But let us return to Afghanistan.

At that time, the greatest problem I faced was the guerrilla Arm Slave, and its pilot, the young Sousuke, was sitting, restrained, in front of me. I had no more reason to hate him for killing my comrades, - on the contrary, we both were overwhelmed by feelings of sadness and grief.

This war was becoming mad. We wanted to return home. Anybody would have thought the same.

* * *

Several weeks after the capture of Sagara Sousuke, days were passing by without any large-scale operations. Having lost their AS, the enemy abandoned any active resistance, and changed their tactics to systematically delay us and hold out as long as they could. Winter came very soon, and during that time any fighting on that battlefield was drastically reduced.

Sousuke's punishment was determined on the basis of local law. If he had been an adult guerrilla, he would have been executed or given a long sentence for being a traitor to the Soviet Union, but he was only a child. He was to be sent to an institution for war orphans in Kabul.

Before his punishment was decided, I visited him regularly. At first, there was almost nothing that could have been considered a normal conversation - he answered very curtly to my attempts to chat. It was exactly the same as in the submarine's medical office. He did not recognise me as the "An-oji-san" he met on the K-244, and my attitude probably puzzled him.

When I informed him that he would be transferred to an orphanage in Kabul, he only answered:

- How many guards are in that orphanage?

He was already thinking of escaping from custody. I answered, taken aback by his attitude:

- This is an orphanage - there are no guards. But if you will try to escape, you will probably be imprisoned further away.

- Where?

- In Leningrad. My home is there, - he did not seem to understand the meaning of my words. - Would you... agree to become my adopted son? My wife already agreed. She's a wonderful woman...

Saying that I handed him her picture, and he, as if remembering something from a long time ago, stared at the photo.

- She is beautiful.

- Isn't she... next year she'll give birth. We can live together, the four of us. You'll learn to be more like a normal human being, with me. We'll teach you music... and cooking...

Hearing that, he hesitated - but he did not refuse right away. This alone was more than enough. I understood that inside him, some emotions and feelings were not dead yet. There was still hope that he could turn away from the life of a killer to a normal human being.

- I have comrades here...

- I know.

- If I'm not there, Hamid and others will be in trouble. I'm the only one who can use the AS.

- And if you do get back, will you fight me once again? - he looked down and did not answer. - Having fought me once, did you not understand? You cannot defeat me. I have been fighting before you were born. And I still think more about life. One time was enough, now if you will meet my family...

He suddenly raised his head. Nothing was reflected in his eyes - no hope, no despair. These eyes were just there, and they gazed at me vaguely.

- I don't understand what you are talking about. What is there, besides fighting or dying? Why didn't you kill me and instead left me here, and why are you saying these things to me?

His words sent a shiver down my spine. I had thought there was something human still left in him, but I suddenly felt that I was losing that confidence. He really did not understand what I had been saying, and I could not do anything. It was a terrible, but genuine question - and it could not be explained to him, like to a machine or animal.

- It has nothing to do with war. It's something for your sake, - I could not think of a better answer at the time.

I urged him then to think about it once again, and transferred him to a clean, single cell. At least like that he was no threat to my comrades. I thought that in time he would no longer wish to return to the guerrillas, and more importantly, the day when his skills stopped being indispensable to them was drawing close.

Secret ceasefire negotiations began at that time between the opposition government with Majeed as its head, the pro-Soviet Afghan administration, the USSR, the USA, Pakistan and Iran. These powers had already been holding preliminary talks for several months, trying to find a common ground between the

rebel and government forces. It was a good sign. The situation on the front had changed drastically, and at that time a ceasefire was a very realistic solution.

* * *

A harsh winter came to the north of Afghanistan. The war with the insurgents entered a passive phase, and my subordinates were enjoying a relatively calm daily routine.

It did little to change Sousuke's mood; however, I felt that I had struck a decisive blow to his mental resistance, and patiently continued to persuade him. My commander and my aide sometimes asked me about it, but did not question my actions. My position did not seem to be compromised by this, as far as I knew, at least. I presumed that I would be the last soldier to quit this battlefield, then I would start working at some factory, - after all, I had no real affection for a military career.

Soon, I would become a father. It was out of the question that I would continue in such a dangerous line of work. Every week I received letters from Irina, where she said that the baby was growing fast, and impatiently read again and again, and showed them to Sousuke, who asked me, incredulously, why I was showing him these, but still looked at them with interest.

The first letter from Irina that troubled me came in December, when the ceasefire negotiations reached their final stage. She said that her body felt heavy, that she had lost her appetite, that she had swollen joints and sometimes abdominal pains. I was, naturally, worried, but upon reflection considered it more or less normal for her physical condition.

Besides Irina and Sousuke, I also had to worry about my duty, which became increasingly important. There was no combat, but I had a role in the implementation of security measures for the ceasefire negotiations. Minister-grade VIPs were meeting in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. Usually, in such circumstances, a third neutral party (usually Switzerland, Sweden or Japan) would offer its good offices for the negotiations, the parties would meet face to face, and discuss questions like defence, security and immigration. This was not the case for these proceedings; I have no knowledge of what went on behind the scenes in the negotiations process, but the insurgent side also approved the use of that meeting place, and general Majeed was personally present at the meetings.

Inside the Soviet Union itself, the driving force behind the ceasefire talks was the Communist party, which arranged the assassination of Gorbachev earlier, and in particular the influential voice of Alksnis, a man from the army. Formerly an Air Force colonel, Alksnis was labelled by the Western media as a very radical member of the hard-line faction, whereas in reality he was a pragmatic statesman and skilful

diplomat¹⁸. He did initially support the idea of continuing the war until complete victory, if necessary, but by now he recognised that continuing this war had no benefit for his country. More importantly, he understood the feelings of soldiers who were shedding their blood on the front line, and thus had the support of many in the Army.

As for me, I was temporarily detached from my regiment and put in charge of the security of the airport of Kabul. At that time, Kabul was, of course, under complete control of the Soviet Army, but there was always a possibility that insurgents that opposed the ceasefire were hiding among the local population.

And then came the news...

It arrived as an encrypted message from regimental headquarters. I was concentrated on the task ahead, quickly giving out instructions on security measures in the airport, when lieutenant Krivenko cautiously approached me and hesitantly called out.

- Captain...

- Later, - I said, turning towards a map of the airport area. The lieutenant's voice somehow seemed to become unnaturally thin.

- It is quite important...

- All right. Speak.

- Sir... your spouse has passed away... together with the child.

* * *

It was medical error.

I did not hear all the details, but apparently this is the way it happened. Irina's physical condition was continuing to deteriorate, and was getting even worse the week after she sent me her last letter, and one night, she had to be transported to a local hospital. The doctor was apparently a drunkard, and there were no necessary medical supplies. It was some quite common illness. In a western hospital, with a proper physician, something could have been done. Their lives could have easily been saved, but they

¹⁸ V. Alksnis (1950-) is a Russian statesman, and grandson of Y. Alksnis, commander of the Red Army Air Force in 1931-1937 (until he was purged together with many others). V. Alksnis was not in reality seen as very influential, but quite known for being a staunch supporter of the Soviet Union, despite his Latvian origins. He now supports nationalist movements in Russia.

weren't, and because of such nonsense Irina died. Together with my child. No, they were killed. Killed by the inferior system of medical care of my country, which I believed in¹⁹.

I remember grabbing the desk with the maps, trying not to fall as my head spun from the shock, and asking my lieutenant if he would take over command.

At the end, my life had no meaning whatsoever.

Nevertheless, immediately afterwards I shook my head and informed the lieutenant that I would personally see to the security. I did not want to think about losing Irina and my child now.

This was one harsh lesson of life, and there was another incident soon after.

On the appointed day of the ceasefire negotiations, "guerrilla" inside Kabul staged a city-wide uprising, on a scale not seen for several years. That scale... that equipment... that flawless organisation... Even if our commanders were extraordinarily incompetent, it would have been nigh impossible to execute such a plan. The city was thrown into chaos because of the "insurgency", and Alksnis, who was staying in one of the hotels, was killed. Curiously, at that time there were almost no guards from the Army stationed near it, and the killers got in and escaped very easily.

Being in the airport area, close to the fighting, intercepting some communications and seeing the peculiar tactics of the attackers, I could easily see through the "insurgents". They were not Afghan guerrillas, but Afghan soldiers, trained by the special forces of the KGB. An order from the lieutenant colonel in charge of the defence of the airport to let nobody pass, and shoot Majeed on sight (because he was the supposed orchestrator behind this uprising), came soon. Not even an hour after it started, Majeed was already declared its leader.

I finally realised: this entire ceasefire proposal was a bait to lure him in, a spectacle, and the Arm Slaves that had been deploying from spring on were meant for a complete extermination of the guerrillas.

"The rebels broke off the negotiations. It is truly regrettable, but they have ruthlessly murdered Comrade Alksnis, who initiated it. He truly desired peace, but it cannot be helped. This war will continue until the last rebel falls." That was their scenario.

If my subordinates were incompetent, the guerrillas could have been saved. That, however, was not the case. They found Majeed, trying to escape from the city, and drove him into a corner of the airport lobby with admirable skill.

- What do we do? The orders from HQ were to shoot on sight, - said then my aide, lieutenant Krivenko.

¹⁹ Some realistic commentary is needed here. Far be it from me to judge the author's choice, but this was, extremely unlikely to happen in reality, especially considering that Kalinin's wife was in Leningrad - the second capital of the country. The FMP! version of the USSR suffered some of the disorder that its real counterpart went through (and the healthcare system continued to work, despite that). Of course, this and the Flight 113's pilot saving the plane was simply fate.

I hesitated for a minute, then gave my men the order to stand by, and approached the Aeroflot counter, where Majeed was hiding, to talk to him myself. I understood everything now.

As I thought, when I approached him, without fear, he did not even point his gun at me. He was a man of around the same age and stature as myself, with a very similar moustache. A very familiar look in his eyes told me that he was tired of the war. His appearance was that of a quiet intellectual, but hid an iron will. I concluded that he held a grudge against filthy schemers that infested a rotten country, and was not a man who would die without seeing his cause through to the end.

- I was finally able to meet you, Your Excellency. I am honoured, - hearing that, he immediately considered the situation, and finally shrugged his shoulders, smiled and answered.

- You must be captain Kalinin.

- Quite right, Sir.

- After you came into my territory, things got quite difficult. What of Kassim? The young Arm Slave pilot?

- He survived. He's still in my base.

- I am relieved to hear it, - he took out the magazine from his pistol, and even the round that was already in the chamber. - Well then? What are you going to do, captain?

I glanced at my men. I could see a deep anxiety on their faces; lieutenant Krivenko shook his head a little, and the other men seemed to want to say the same thing: "Don't do it, captain, please." However, I said:

- I will accompany you to the plane. Please, travel with me to my base first. It is understandable that my words, as your enemy, may seem strange - but there is still a reason for you to be alive.

I fully realised the consequences of me saving him. However, now did not matter, for I would never see Irina again - in any case.

* * *

We quickly flew out of the city and to the base near Panjsher. I left my men with Krivenko in Kabul. This act was mine alone, and I had performed it based on my own judgement.

I made up an excuse to the regimental commander, and transferred Majeed along with Kassim to a transport helicopter. After that, time became a blur.

When we were fleeing to the Panjsher plateau, fighters came in pursuit. There was no warning of returning to base - the fighters just fired at us. The helicopter pilot began panicking, and I had to hold

him at gunpoint while he brought us very low above the ground - and one of the fighters fired a heat-seeking missile.

It exploded at point-blank range, and our machine sustained considerable damage. Pieces of the fuselage were coming off, the engine made a strange whine, the earth seemed to spin around us and the white rocks of the mountain seemed to be coming towards me very fast - then an impact of incredible force, and I immediately lost consciousness.

When I next woke up, I was in Majeed's camp, a fortnight after we crashed. My body seemed to have been almost torn apart. If it was not for the care of the excellent physician, who was also one of Majeed's men, I would have certainly died. This doctor told me gently that my survival was a miracle, but I thought then that I did not wish for this kind of miracle, for if I had died, I would not have had to suffer so much.

Kassim - no, Sagara Sousuke returned to his guerrilla unit. He came to visit me once. He brought back a picture of Irina that I lent him, and told me that he decided to fight and die here.

Majeed came to visit more frequently, and prayed for my recovery to his God, but said the same thing as Sousuke. There was no hope for a ceasefire anymore. We were all going to die there.

It took me two months to be able to walk again. I did not have any intention to try and return to my own unit. I betrayed my country just as it had betrayed me. Who would welcome me back?

After my complete recovery, I joined the same unit as Sousuke, and proceeded to teach him what I knew of war. At least, if I taught him this, and if he survived, he would perhaps one day be able to return to the peaceful world. That is what I thought, or, rather, the only thought I was desperately clinging to.

Soon, spring came, and with it a full-scale offensive of the Soviet Army. Majeed's forces were getting slaughtered by the AS. That year would mark the victory of the Soviet Union in the Afghan war.

I also intended to die there, however, fate would not have it. I ended up escaping the Afghan hell together with Sousuke, and as mercenaries, we moved from one battlefield to another, because we did not know what else to do.

During that time, I taught a lot of things to Sousuke - tactics, survival, and a few languages. Japanese was one of them. Since I only knew his name in hiragana, I also chose the kanji for it. When we became separated on the battlefields of Cambodia, I travelled to a various places myself, and then - I joined Mithril. Sometime later, exactly one year ago, Sagara Sousuke joined the unit that was led by my subordinate, Melissa Mao.

Objectively speaking, it can only be called a coincidence. I, however, saw it as something inevitable.

Divine will? Whimsical fate?

I would not know... And neither does he.

[Birth of the <<Tuatha de Danaan>>]

First of all, I would ask you kindly not to refer to me by that appalling nickname, "Duke."

I, Richard Henry Mardukas, was not born into a noble family, and did not have any particularly praiseworthy talents. I am an ordinary man who had spent enough time doing his duty to acquire a certain amount of knowledge and skill, and who has learned to be in the right place at the right time.

I was born and raised in the suburbs of Birmingham, in the family of a doctor. I was a quiet, introverted boy, who preferred logical puzzles and mathematical games designed for adults. I did not particularly dislike sports, however when playing with friends from school I always thought that I would rather be spending this time with Joseph Blackburne's book²⁰, carefully reading his old record of chess matches once again. Observing the irregular, disorderly movements of my friends was not an enjoyable pastime for me. Instead, the simple yet elegant movement of elements and the absolute order of the metaphysical world captivated my imagination.

The story of me joining the Navy is curious enough on its own.

The ocean, and the naval combat which unfolds on it, are a world where chaos seems to reign. Besides that, if one looks broadly at my family lineage, only three people have served in the military. One of them was a camera technician, another worked in the meteorological service, and the third one was a tuba player in a military band (none of them were in the Navy, however, they participated in both wars against the Germans, and not all returned home).

My parents and other people around me had decided for themselves that I would go to a normal university. My father, being a conservative person, was opposed to my choice, even mockingly asking me if I wanted to become Admiral Hornblower. Horatio Hornblower was a character from Nelson's time, the beginning of the 19th century, who first appeared in the novels of C.S. Forrester. To an Englishman there was no character who was more recognisable, - and he also was the son of a doctor. My father's sarcasm was obvious, but it did nothing to change my mind.

I thought being called "Admiral Richard Mardukas" was not too bad. I was still quite young then, and still had something like a foolish spirit of adventure. Also I think that I hid a certain hate for both my own introvert nature, my imaginary goal, and the inconsistency between them. In any case, I intended to become a man of the sea.

At the end, I managed to convince my father, and owing to his efforts, and fortune that smiled upon me then, I was able to get into the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth. For someone of my birth and social status, it was an almost impossible feat. Of course, I studied frantically. My life aboard a frigate as a

²⁰ Joseph Henry "Black Death" Blackburne, famous British chess player of the 19th - early 20th century. His book was originally published in 1899.

cadet fresh from basic training was at times harsh and exhausting, but a wonderful experience nonetheless, and I had decided to remain in the surface fleet and serve aboard a warship. Looking back, it is curious to note that the thought of even getting aboard a submarine hadn't crossed my mind then.

Historically, in the Royal Navy submariners were treated as outcasts, though this prejudice seems to have disappeared in recent times. A ship that lurks in the deep and cowardly attacks the enemy from the darkness - that was the traditional image of a submarine. For me, then a young man full of ambition, the prospect of becoming an outcast was unthinkable. However, eventually I found my way to the submarine officers' course. I do not intend to write here about the minor details and feelings that made me choose it, - suffice to say, at the time I was quite discouraged by the way things went. A friend from the same class, whose grades were considerably lower than mine, was allowed to continue serving in the surface fleet, - he was the second son of a baron.

When someone had to be blamed, it was me. A ship with that reputation is perfectly suitable for the son of a commoner, - that was what they seemed to think, and it wounded my pride. Thinking about it now, I realise that this only pushed me to invest even greater effort into my studies.

The submarine proved to be the ideal weapon for me. Contrary to my expectations, submarine warfare was not a hopelessly convoluted affair, instead being very close to a board game, with all of its simplicity and fairness. And in the unique situation that we were in - the Cold War - no other type of navy forces had such a pivotal role. When I realised that, the foolish prejudice I held as a cadet became a thing of the past, and I devoted myself to my duty with renewed enthusiasm.

I cannot say that I had an inspiring presence of a leader, or that I had a talent for flattery, but I had a grasp of the basics of engineering and was quite proficient in tactics. I progressed steadily, one step at a time, and hoped to become one day a full-fledged military officer. By then, of course, I had realised that I would not become a new Hornblower, but I was nonetheless satisfied with my position.

During the Falklands conflict I was the executive officer of the "Conqueror" attack submarine. The "Conqueror" was not a particularly new vessel, but then sunk the Argentinean cruiser "General Belgrano" with three unguided torpedoes (of which two hit). In the official records this was the first kill by a nuclear submarine in battle. Of course, since the battles of the World War II era diesel subs, this would have been the first publicly known naval engagement. There were perhaps others before it, which remained hidden from history. I heard such rumours myself, but in any case, "Conqueror"'s battle became known to the world as the first major victory of the submarine fleet in a long time, a fact that was compounded by the immediate and complete success of that attack.

The ships of the Argentinean Navy, driven by revenge, passed over us and launched their entire payload of depth charges. They exploded one after another all around us with a terrible roar, the vessel shook from the blasts, and the hull strained under the manifold increase of the pressure of the water, great as it was usually. There were accidental deaths during training or on duty, but until then I had not felt death so close. However, during that battle, I discovered a unique quality in myself - something close to a state of absolute concentration. It was a kind of extremely cold and calculating state of mind which enabled me to see everything objectively. The feeling is very difficult to put into words. It felt as if I was

looking at, instead of my own life, at the story of a victim of a terrible accident, on the news from the other side of the globe. Everything around me became a piece on a checkered board, and I was quietly reading the record of the chess party. Of course, I was perfectly aware of the rules of this game, and could predict dozens of moves ahead. I was, of course, tempted to start moving them, but unfortunately I was only the executive officer of that ship.

Commander Brown was the captain of the vessel - an experienced and wise officer whom we all treated with the utmost respect. His command of the warship was always correct - no, even perfect, which is why the "Conqueror" escaped the enemy with only one casualty.

However, I kept feeling a certain lack of complete satisfaction. If our tactics were a little more elaborate, we could have scored another kill, - I was sure of that. These were prideful thoughts, and I knew I was forgetting my place, but it was very difficult to keep this discontent from showing on my face as I was standing near the captain on the bridge. When the "Conqueror" escaped to a safe area, the captain looked at me for the first time after the tense situation ended and frowned.

- Mister Mardukas... what's with the cap? - he just noticed it.

I realised that I was wearing my cap backwards. I must have unconsciously put it on that way. One of my duties being the strict enforcement of discipline among the crew, I was extremely ashamed by this incident. The crew might have gotten the wrong impression that I was panicked by the depth charge explosions, and might have stopped being afraid of my reprimands. This strange habit still remains with me. After battle or manoeuvres, when winning demands my full concentration, I realise that my cap is backwards. On that occasion I just returned it to its proper position, dreading what my subordinates were thinking at that moment.

* * *

After the Falklands conflict, I successfully completed the Submarine Command Course, known as the "Perisher"²¹, and was granted the position of commanding officer on the "Spartan"²². On that submarine, trials befitting a historical Spartan awaited me, but I managed to overcome them and even earn a few commendations; perhaps because of this in several years' time I became the captain of a nuclear submarine that was then state-of-the-art. It was the Trafalgar-class S-87 "Turbulent"²³, and I was already its captain when I first met Commander Carl Testarossa, from the US Navy.

²¹ It really is called like that. This is the first article that comes up when you search for it, and it's a pretty interesting read: http://www.navy.mil/navydata/cno/n87/usw/issue_18/perisher.htm

²² HMS Spartan (S105), a Swiftsure-class sub, in service from 1979 to 2006.

²³ Still in service today, it was commissioned in 1984 (just for chronological reference); scheduled for decommissioning next year.

It happened in the middle of the 1980's - a period which to me seemed like a particularly cold and unforgiving winter, one which continues to this day. In those days, American and British submarine fleets were working together to constantly track the movements of their Soviet counterparts. If I were to find a suitable comparison, the other side's submarines would be like bombers, with an enormous destructive potential hidden in their bulky hulls, while hunter-killer submarines like ours were close to fighters - small, manoeuvrable, with enough power to destroy enemy vessels. The soviet submarines - the "bombers" - carried a great number of SLBMs with MIRV warheads²⁴, and upon receiving the order were to launch a nuclear strike on Britain, as well as other targets. We had to act before the Russians burned our nation from the face of the Earth, and send the enemy vessels to their watery grave, so we had to be in a state of constant alert.

Compared to the current weakened Soviet naval forces, at that time they were much more powerful. We had identified in all at least seventy strategic nuclear submarines. On the other side, hunting them were seventy-two United States hunter-killer nuclear submarines, with almost ninety more in the Royal Navy²⁵. As our vessels also had to perform convoy duties and the like, we could not simply divide ships between those, and as the enemy threat could come from anywhere, our numbers were by far not sufficient.

Of course, it was a matter of tactics, and so could not be measured by numbers alone. We were always devising new plans to counter the enemy, and knew even the operational routines of the Soviet strategic submarines, so we were not as afraid of them as Reagan or Thatcher might have been.

Besides, my-- no, Her Majesty's "Turbulent" was a wonderful, state-of-the-art warship. Named after a small brig launched around 180 years ago, this hunter-killer submarine was the fifth ship to bear the name "Turbulent". With its cutting-edge fission reactor, innovative pump-jet propulsion system²⁶ and advanced sonar, it was the finest attack vessel of its time. Seen from the first-generation "Turbulent", it was close to a spaceship.

That day, the "Turbulent", under my command, was quietly cruising in the northern waters several hundred miles to the south-west of the Svalbard archipelago. While on standard patrol duty, at the same time testing the new pump-jet propulsion in the Arctic waters, we intercepted the signal of a Soviet Victor-III class submarine, and followed it to make sure it returned to its home port in the Barents sea²⁷.

²⁴ Submarine-launched ballistic missile with Multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles.

²⁵ I know you're surprised, and it's not a typo. Apparently in the FMP! world the British have a lot more submarines than they really had, three times more in fact.

²⁶ It is in fact a shrouded propeller (sometimes known as ducted fan) configuration, distant relative of other pump-jets (like those used in some torpedoes), also used on the new Astute-class, US Seawolf-class and Russian Borey-class.

²⁷ Parallel narrative. See "Voice from the North". This also helps establishing the timeline, see Appendix A.

We only spotted the next target when it was very close. At approximately 0530 hours GMT, the duty officer's messenger woke me from my sleep. It seemed that we had some sort of failure in the propulsion systems - a damper supporting one of the compressors broke down, and if left unattended, we would be heard for miles around. Silent operation of a submarine is quite possibly its most important quality, because it reduces the risk of detection by an enemy vessel. In this case, getting back to the home port was much more tricky, and temporary repairs would not take that long. I therefore carefully stopped the ship, ordered both temporary repairs and a full check of other systems. There have been numerous cases where a small, seemingly unrelated failure, was the sign of a bigger problem. However, after everything was done, it seemed that apart from the damper there were no other abnormalities in the ship's systems.

At that moment, the sonar informed me that they had a signal. The very faint noise of a screw could only be coming from a Soviet strategic submarine. If we weren't lying still because of the repairs, we would have missed the sound.

The target was heading south, which could mean that it was trying to get closer to the British Isles. The moment we were finished with repairs, I ordered the pursuit of the Soviet submarine. We began tailing it at a distance of twenty miles, where we could get a clear echo, and as data came in we could guess what opponent we were facing. It was close to the Delta-III class, but the data did not quite match known types.

- Could be a newer modification of the Delta-III, - remarked one of the sonar specialists.

My thoughts were the same. The Soviet navy had recently introduced the world's largest nuclear submarine, the Typhoon-class, which, despite being an ambitious design, had yet to see practical application. The core of the Soviet submarine forces was comprised of ships whose design was proven to be effective - the Delta-III. I later learned that this was a warship of the newer Delta-IV class²⁸[10].

At any rate, the "Turbulent" found its prey. Gathering any possible data was our natural duty. To continue pursuing the new Delta, I ordered the ship to rise to periscope depth and contact Headquarters, who promptly gave me their approval.

The new Delta was quietly continuing on its course just below the thermocline - that is, the layer of water that marks a radical drop of temperature and separates the top layer from the deep ocean. Roughly speaking, it is a "blanket" that cuts off sound between the top and bottom layers of water. If two warships are in the same layer, they can quite easily detect one another, while ships in different layers will have difficulty getting any signal. Properly speaking, there are several equations describing the relation between the salinity of the water and frequency of the sound, as well as demodulation of the signal and quality of transmission²⁹, that I could elaborate upon; but it is not my purpose.

²⁸ Incidentally, the Delta-IV's displacement is over 18200 tonnes, while the displacement of the Los Angeles-class is a little over 6900, and Trafalgar-class is noted as around 5200. Bear the difference in size in mind for the upcoming pages.

²⁹ It is a joy to see an author who does his research.

Unfortunately, always seeking precision to the point of boring my interlocutor is one of the flaws of my character. I shall endeavour to control myself without straying further from the main narrative.

Suffice to say, the "Turbulent", under my command, silently crept up to the new Delta. We drew closer to a distance of approximate ten miles, dropped our speed so as to reduce the acoustic signature, and silently descended below the thermocline, where our opponent was...

... So, I am somewhat late, - I thought irritably, - but on the other hand, I am sure I have taken into account all possible factors and my approach manoeuvre was flawless... yes, decidedly, there were no mistakes. I would like *you* to acknowledge that.

My words were addressed to the other ship that we found the moment we crossed the thermocline - it was also pursuing the new Delta. It was so silent that our sonar could barely pick it up until the last moment. The second hunter was a Los Angeles-class hunter-killer submarine of the United States Navy.

* * *

It was the SSN-700 "Dallas".

Despite us being in friendly competition during combat exercises, they were, of course, our allies. Nonetheless, I had not encountered the "Dallas" previously, and I did not even know the name of the captain. They had, of course, noticed us; we were both almost holding our breath in pursuit of the Soviet submarine, and did not even need to communicate to coordinate our actions. The "Turbulent" and the "Dallas" settled at a comfortable five miles from each other, continuing to shadow the target in silence for another twenty hours. The Soviet submarine was wary, and sometimes tried to check if it was being followed by performing a series of sudden, dangerous turns, commonly known as "Crazy Ivan"³⁰, which put us under considerable pressure. The presence of "Dallas" only added to the tension. It may not be evident for someone who has not taken part in submarine operations, but if the Americans committed a blunder, my pursuit would also be at risk; the other side's thoughts probably echoed mine.

³⁰ This isn't his invention, either. It is a real-life manoeuvre, executed as a series of sharp turns to check behind the submarine, - its sonar would normally not be able to hear anything in that dead zone (called "the baffles") because of the noise of its own propeller. However, it should be noted that most modern subs carry towed sonar arrays (mounted on the tail fin), which eliminate that dead zone. The Delta-IV class is, however, outfitted with a "Pelamida" towed array (unlike the older Delta-III), so why did it have to do the Crazy Ivans? See later.

Meanwhile, the new Delta was heading straight for the British Isles. Its course itself was definitely unusual. If it was allowed to advance a little further, London would be in the range of its nuclear missiles³¹.

Moreover, the fact that it was operating independently was strange. In the event of a planned attack, a strategic submarine would be normally escorted by one or two hunter-killer submarines. But there were no other vessels of any kind in the area. I remember being taken over by a strong sense of apprehension. Are they trying to defect, or...

But then our target showed signs of activity. Liquid fuel was being loaded into the ballistic missiles. Having received that message from the front sonar, I went to check myself, and heard the unmistakeable sound through the headset.

Those were the preparation for launch of a nuclear missile. I could not believe it, but it was a fact.

At that time, no unusual activity of the Soviet Army and its Warsaw Pact allies was reported. Secretary General Gorbachev was driving forward his perestroika, and was actively seeking a dialogue with the West. Starting a nuclear war with the Western powers in this situation made no sense.

Meanwhile, the duty officer had received instructions from the HQ that came through the VLS antenna³². The orders were simple, but sent chills down my spine.

"The vessel, identified as a newer Delta-class, is to be sunk. Make it your first priority."

Only momentarily I doubted whether the HQ was serious. This submarine was about to launch a nuclear strike at the heart of my country, Great Britain. The HQ had received this intelligence from another source, and there could be no mistake. Whether the captain was mad, or acting under orders from the radical factions in the Soviet army circles, I do not know to this day.

I did not have a second to lose.

I ordered all personnel to battle stations, and to bring down the enemy with one sure salvo I tried to get even closer. I noticed that the "Dallas" had also started moving. Quite possibly it had also detected the sound of fuel being loaded, and received the same order. The "Dallas" was even more silent than us, and it edged forward. I respected their decision and we dropped back somewhat, providing cover.

In this case we both knew our place. If we had accelerated, thinking only about distinguishing ourselves, we would be running the risk of revealing our presence to the enemy. Nevertheless, even if the captain of the new Delta class was driven by madness, he was a frighteningly skilful commander, and the

³¹ In reality it carries R-29RM series (SS-N-23 "Skiff") ICBMs with a maximum range of around 9300km which obviously could hit London from the Arctic. The Svalbard archipelago is only 3000km away. Perhaps it was aiming to fire the missile on a depressed trajectory (which means that it doesn't make the ballistic "loop" and instead goes right towards the target, allowing a very quick strike).

³² Not clear what he means by that, since VLS stands for Vertical Launch System, which is the main missile-firing system on board the sub. Perhaps he means floating antenna buoys, or a regular extendable antenna.

submarine's sonar capabilities exceeded our expectations. We did not know the moment when he realised that he was being pursued by the "Dallas".

When the "Dallas" began its approach, the enemy changed its course up, towards the thermocline. Both the "Turbulent" and "Dallas" followed, but then the enemy's acoustic signature vanished. Using the thermocline and a warm current that passed here, he disappeared for what seemed like moments to me. When we next detected him, he had finished his turn and was starting a ferocious attack on the "Dallas". Sonar reported the sound of water filling the enemy's torpedo tubes. It seemed that before launching his nuclear payload he wanted to take care of his pursuer. The "Dallas" was taken unawares, not being in full battle readiness.

Forward sonar registered one blast.

First a distinctive long, high-pitched whine reverberated throughout the ship, then came the deep, stifled roar. The enemy launched a salvo of two torpedoes at the "Dallas"; the latter, taken by surprise, answered with one Mk48, then steered hard to port, going into a tight evasive manoeuvre and launching decoys. It managed to evade one of the torpedoes, but the other one detonated at point blank range.

In all honesty, at that moment I believed that this was the end for the "Dallas". The surprise attack was so flawlessly executed, that the warship should have not been able to escape, and even avoiding one of the two torpedoes showed the captain's considerable skill. However, the "Dallas" did not sink. It sustained some damage, but after the terrible detonation we could still hear the faint noise of her propeller. The enemy submarine meanwhile was performing an evasive manoeuvre, and while the Mk48 torpedo was an excellent, reliable weapon, in this situation it was more a nuisance than a real threat, and it did not hit.

The "Dallas" was still struggling to control the damage from the torpedo hit, while the Delta was evidently getting ready to strike once more.

Inevitably, it was my turn to move.

The enemy did not know about the existence of the "Turbulent", and so could not take my actions into account. I ordered the ship to break out of the thermocline where it was hiding, and set a course that would set us between the two vessels at full speed. As the pump jet propulsion was a new system, its acoustic characteristics should have been mostly unknown to the enemy. Even if the enemy ship did suspect something, it would not have time to estimate range and speed. Moreover, I was determined not to give them a second.

The Tigerfish torpedoes were loaded into their tubes. Firing one at an actual enemy vessel would be the first time I did so as captain, but I did not hesitate for even a fraction of a second.

The torpedoes were away. The enemy also launched a salvo - and it was aimed at the effectively immobile "Dallas". Being in a disadvantaged position, they most likely decided to finish off the first target.

We were already in position, defending the "Dallas", but even if we did save it this time, our next attack would be severely delayed by this manoeuvre. In that case, provided he successfully evaded our torpedoes, the enemy would have the initiative. So the salvo fired at the "Dallas" had a double goal - yes, the commanding officer of the enemy submarine was a very shrewd man.

At that moment I remember well hearing a very distinct sound: the active sonar of the "Dallas". By itself it was a meaningless action, but I immediately understood that it wasn't seeking the enemy - it was a message to me. The captain was trying to tell me that whereas they lost propulsion systems, they still had their offensive capability. Keeping an eye on the map of this sector of the sea, I was trying to trace the thoughts of the American captain. He evidently thought that if I somehow managed to protect him from the enemy torpedoes, he would manage to deliver the final blow to the enemy. I did not know what kind of man the captain of the "Dallas" was, and what resources he still had. The moment of decision was drawing near.

Should I leave the "Dallas" to its fate and continue the attack?

Should I entrust my fate to its captain and continue defending it?

Can I place my faith in a submarine that has lost its capacity to manoeuvre and only sounded an active sonar?..

- All right, - I muttered, giving the order to place our ship between the "Dallas" and the enemy torpedoes, fully understanding the mortal danger of such an action. The tension was such that I almost physically felt seconds pass inside my head.

As if following the plan, the enemy torpedoes locked on to our vessel. I ordered full speed ahead, to completely lead them away, launched decoys and went into the most daring evasive manoeuvre I could think of. Despite that, they detonated close to the "Turbulent".

The shock was violent enough to remind me of the depth charges in the Falklands campaign. I lost my balance and landed on my backside, on the interior communications console. Other crewmembers suffered the same fate, tumbling down on the floor from their duty stations.

The damage control officer, first up, was shouting for reports. The lights flickered as the power was inevitably damaged. It seemed that several compartments were in danger of being flooded, ventilation had stopped, and fire had broken out in two places.

In the middle of this momentary chaos, compounded by the roar of alarm sirens, sonar was able to report on the situation. The enemy managed to avoid both of our torpedoes. Damn those good-for-nothing Tigerfish...³³ Back in the Falkland campaign, Captain Brown was very reluctant to use them, preferring to rely on old-style unguided torpedoes, - he was right, of course; but no counter-attack followed.

³³ The Mk24 Tigerfish torpedoes, guided by wire to the point of passive sonar homing, were considered to be unreliable and generally a failure. Which is why they were readily replaced by the newer Swordfish type.

While we were chased by enemy torpedoes, the salvo fired by "Dallas" approached its target and hit the Delta-class submarine. Two explosions resounded in the deep waters, followed by a sickening sound that was a submarine hull, folding and twisting under pressure. It was also the sound of an enormous bubble of air swelling and pulling this hull apart. After a series of small detonations, the enemy vessel began to sink, at first very quietly. The maximum depth in that particular spot was well over 2600 feet³⁴. The metal, strained by hydraulic pressure many times exceeding its nominal limit, was soon crushed, and finally one last, big detonation ended the submarine's life. The vessel's hull, torn into tiny pieces, sank thousands of feet to the bottom of the ocean. Listening to that was not a pleasant experience to say the least. Even if it was an enemy that was preparing to launch a nuclear strike, and was ready to kill us, one could not help but remember that there were more than a hundred people on board...

Nevertheless, the engagement was over. I felt the executive officer's³⁵ gaze on me, and quickly straightened the regulation cap, that I had as usual turned backwards in a moment of tension. We were fortunate: the damage was not as great as I expected. Six people received injuries of varying degree. Several broken bones, other trauma, and light burns were commonplace after any accident. The fire was successfully put down, temporary repairs were initiated at the flooded compartments and other points that required them.

The damage to the "Dallas" was not as serious as it had seemed; their repairs were finished almost at the same time as hours, and she regained manoeuvring capability. It seemed that we could both reach our home ports without outside help.

The "Dallas" approached slowly at periscope depth, and soon we were running a parallel course with approximately sixteen hundred feet between us. After a short time, I was told that the other captain wanted to speak to me over underwater telephone³⁶, which was the reason why he came closer. I was more than willing to talk to him.

- *This is USS Dallas, Commander Carl Testarossa speaking. Do you read?* - the man's voice was powerful, but also gave the impression of a certain presence and grace. I was reminded not of the commander of a warship, but rather an actor performing one of Shakespeare's plays.

My hoarse voice, on the other hand, was definitely lacking in elegance and gave the impression of constant gloom.

- Loud and clear. This is HMS Turbulent, Commander Richard Mardukas speaking. Is your ship capable of unassisted navigation?

- *Affirmative. I believe that we can even fix it ourselves. Thank you for your concern. Is yours in order?*

- No major problems here.

³⁴ The author just says "800", and later insists on using metres. Mardukas is British, so I took the liberty to convert the values.

³⁵ The executive officer, or XO, is the second in command on a submarine.

³⁶ It may sound a little silly, but that is actually the official denomination. The distance is somewhat limited, which is why they needed to get closer. See for example http://jproc.ca/rrp/rrp2/oberon_sonar.html

- *Oh, I am truly glad to hear that, - I heard Commander Testarossa sigh on the other end of the line. - Please, let me at least say how grateful I am, Commander Mardukas. I was, honestly speaking, gambling on whether you would understand a single active sonar signal, but we did not have any other means... Thank you, Commander. In the name of the United States of America, and my own crew, I only wish to express our deepest gratitude...*

It was an excessively polite expression of gratitude, but at least it was not the sort of fake camaraderie one could expect. He was truly grateful to me, and unlike most Americans, thinking of themselves as rulers of the sea, his attitude was that of admirable modesty.

In any case, I thought he would answer with something close to: "Hey, thanks, cowboy. See you around!" - thinking of the other party as the typical, showy US Navy crowd. Instead I was somewhat bewildered by his response, and after an awkward silence answered:

- No, I should be thanking you. I will henceforth pray for your safety on the seas.

- *I wish you the same, sir. Anyhow, when we get ashore I would like to meet you in person, sir. And I will gladly introduce you to my wife and her excellent home cooking.*

- It would be my pleasure.

- *Then, farewell, captain. Lieutenant Sailor, hard to starboard, bearing two-six-oh.*

He turned from the phone, giving an order to the young lieutenant, who promptly responded with an "aye-aye, sir" in his characteristic, booming voice.

Telephone contact was soon broken as "Dallas" left those waters.

As expected, this incident remained unknown to the world. The crew of the "Turbulent" was sternly instructed not to mention anything about the missing Delta-IV submarine that we sank. My report was also treated as top secret, and it will probably be declassified only in fifty years.

I do not know to this day if that submarine was really preparing to launch its nuclear arsenal, and perhaps the only ones who did know took their knowledge with them to the bottom of the ocean.

An opportunity to meet with Commander Testarossa arose sooner than I had thought. The "Turbulent" was moored for at least half a year for repair and refit, and I went to the East coast of the United States on technical business related to a joint shipbuilding undertaking. I informed him of my visit to America by letter, and he gladly invited me to his home in Portsmouth.

That is where I first met that little lady. She was around five years old at the time. Those same, large grey eyes and ashen blonde hair. She was a little scared of me, but kept her calm, even though I could sense some uneasiness in her greeting. God knows I would never have imagined that one day I would be saluting her...

* * *

Carl Testarossa was a quiet, pleasant, even handsome man, somewhat younger than myself. As I had imagined, hearing his voice over the telephone, he was impeccably elegant, discreet, with a polite smile that seemed to never fade from his face. His deep, grey eyes always seemed to look at something very far away, but they also had the unshakeable resolve of a true man of the sea.

I only spent a day in his home, and yet I had enjoyed it like few other things. His house was on the outskirts of Portsmouth, atop a cliff surrounded by a pine forest, that offered a splendid panorama of the Atlantic ocean. Early mornings were especially magnificent, with a sunrise that seemed to illuminate the entire horizon. It was an old mansion, maintained in perfect condition. Every spring it drowned in flowers that were blossoming all around it. The nigh-perfect stillness, perturbed only by the chirping of a multitude of birds, and the dull rumble of the sea, created an idyllic atmosphere that calmed the soul. The town was only a half an hour's walk away, the naval base where he served was only twenty minutes away by car, - it really was an enviably perfect place to live.

His wife Maria was a quiet, graceful woman with a gentle smile, whose beautiful ashen blonde hair I would be reminded of later. If Teresa had spent her life as peacefully, she would have been the perfect copy of her mother...

Her cooking - ah, remembering Carl's pride, I could only nod in assent, as it was fully justified. The steamed chicken pâté with basil sauce was fabulous, almost melting in my mouth; the main dish was roasted lamb, very tender, made with fragrant herbs I did not know. I have always thought that delicious food can bring out the humblest in any human being. During my visit I was, as usual, extremely polite and reserved, but after tasting it I could only stare and repeat "wonderful... wonderful!" Mrs Testarossa smiled at my reaction, and I could only smile back. Miss Teresa was the last one to smile - the little girl seemed to be watching my expression intently.

- She's a very intelligent child, - Commander Testarossa remarked after dinner, when we were sitting in lounge chairs on the terrace and enjoying a fine whiskey. Teresa was helping her mother clean up after dinner. - Oh, her mother is quite bright, too, but she is... unusual. She hasn't even started elementary school, and yet she already read some books from my library. I would not be so surprised if it was poetry or prose, but those are monographs and treatises of mathematics and engineering. I tried to test her several times with problems that a graduate student would find difficult... she seems to enjoy them like crossword puzzles, and cracks them one after another. And languages... read Italian, German, French and Latin. And they're now busy learning Russian.

Apart from my mother language, I only knew Russian. It was the enemy's language, so I had no choice but to learn it, with a great degree of difficulty, so naturally I was very surprised. Obviously, she was a

prodigy. But another thing caught my attention.

- I'm sorry, but did you say "they"? Do you have other children? - when I asked, Commander Testarossa suddenly fell silent, and a gloomy shadow passed across his face.

- Yes. I realise that it was rude of me not to say anything, but I do have a son. He and Teresa are, in fact, twins. I'm sure you have noticed that Teresa is already quite shy, but Leonard even more so. He is practically afraid of strangers. I tried to make him stay today, even scolded him, but as you see it had no result. An officer I am acquainted with, Borda, was kind enough to take care of him for me today. He's from the surface fleet, but actually a quite reasonable man.

That was the first time I heard Admiral Borda's name (then he had to be commander or captain).

- Mister Mardukas... Please, forgive my son's rudeness.

- Oh no, not at all, your son is only five, I would never think of reproaching him anything!

My words were completely sincere, but Commander Testarossa frowned, as if suddenly realising something.

- Is something the matter?

- Ah... well, you are right. Living with them, one forgets their age... yes, it's a really trivial matter, isn't it. I'm simply overthinking it.

- They are prodigies, after all, I'm sure it's only natural to do so.

- If they were just prodigies...

He became more serious than ever, so much that it seemed out of place.

- I'm sorry, but I'm not quite following...

Commander Testarossa sighed and looked down for a moment. Then he leaned back, taking his glass in both hands. His eyes were partly closed, looking at me as if studying me very cautiously. He appeared to hesitate for a few moments, then finally spoke.

- Mister Mardukas... When I tell you this, please do not think of me as a... weird person. It is... difficult to talk about this to other people, and I understand very well how ridiculous it may sound.

It was definitely a very strange beginning of a story. I sat a little more upright, so as to show my attentiveness. I did not doubt the reason of Commander Testarossa. To me, he was not just anybody, but a comrade in arms, someone with whom I shared a part in a life and death battle in the cold waters of the ocean. That is why I was prepared to take anything he said seriously.

- But of course, I would not doubt you. You are a fine officer, Commander.

- Thank you...

- So, you were saying, your children?..

- Yes, as I said, everything would be fine if they were simply child prodigies. They would have a better future in front of them, but... Leonard and Teresa are different. At this age, mastering foreign languages and solving devilishly complicated equations... well, you can find other examples. Sometimes you hear about them in the news, you know - children who can remember an entire phonebook after glancing through once. These cases are quite rare, but they do exist.

I nodded in agreement. I saw some news articles about them, and history had a few recorded cases among scholars, such as von Neumann³⁷.

- But as you say, your children are... different?

- Please wait here, I'll be back shortly.

He stood up and briskly walked back into the house, most probably to his study, I thought. He promptly returned with three sheets of drawing paper.

- Here, - he said gravely, and handed them to me.

I expected children's scribbles with colour crayons. Needless to say, I was mistaken.

Instead what I saw were clear, concise blueprints and diagrams, coupled with complex equations and formulae. The format was unknown to me, and looked like nonsense at first, and the symbols and parameters were different from those I knew. An unqualified person, seeing this, would have dismissed it as nonsensical scribbles. They were most definitely not. From what I could remember from my knowledge in the field, which was clearly lacking, these equations dealt with reflection and attenuation of electromagnetic waves. On the second sheet was described a process of targeted interference by changing phases of certain electromagnetic waves at extremely high speed, and even a blueprint of three-dimensional usage of such a device. The third sheet described how this device would negate electromagnetic waves, even avoiding detection by radar. On top of everything, it was applicable to visible radiation.

ECS.

That exact system, the Electromagnetic Camouflage, that is now in widespread use, but which changed the face of modern warfare forever - its principles were written on those sheets.

³⁷ János (John von) Neumann, 1903-1957. Child prodigy and one of the greatest mathematicians (and physicists) in history. Also known for being one of the scientists on the Los Alamos project not against using the bombs on Japan. Later collaborated on the hydrogen bomb and early computers. In short: fearsome fellow.

At that time stealth was not a technology many people were familiar with. The United States Airforce was already using Lockheed's stealth bomber, which used the angle of reflection of radar waves, offering passive protection to create an "invisible" aircraft. Even those were shrouded in absolute secrecy. These child's scribbles contained a technology much more advanced, an active stealth system.

- It is... too elaborate to be a joke, - I sighed finally, being at a loss for words. He nodded.

- Leonard and Teresa did this together, last year. I asked them where they saw it, but they just told me they thought of it by themselves. There is nothing of this sort in any book I have in the study. No, even in the national library, among classified documents of the Pentagon there is probably nothing even close. I let a specialist from the MIT take a look at it once - even to him this was unknown.

Even more bewildered than before, I could only stare at Carl Testarossa.

- So... in short, you are saying that your children, without being taught by anyone, wrote down the principles of a cutting-edge technical innovation that potentially has enormous importance for national security?

- Yes... though I could really be going insane.

His eyes, however, unlike those of a man losing his reason, were clear.

Suffering. The only thing I could now see in his face was suffering. No man possessed by an insane delusion or conspiracy theory could show that.

- Mister Mardukas... I would ask you not to speak of this to anyone... If their abilities became known, they would probably be denied the right to the normal life they led until now...

- But of course. You have my word, - I replied immediately, but it did little to alleviate his anguish.

- Thank you. To tell you the truth... there is a precedent.

- A precedent?

- A child like Teresa and Leonard. A couple of years ago, I heard about it from a local Alaskan news channel. They talked about a child who had barely reached an age where he could say "mama", but wrote complex chemical formulae and physics equations with his crayons. Most people thought it was just another fluke from a stupid talk show, but one section didn't think so. In those drawings was described a yet unknown shape memory plastic and special titanium alloy, as well as the basis model of a completely new type of computer.

The adults who used this child for a primitive purpose of self-advertisement did not have any education of this level. This information turned out to be much more useful than material for a simple talk show.

- I went through a lot of trouble to get the pictures of that report, - continued Carl Testarossa. - There was no mistake. Even with my basic knowledge of physics I could see that what that child wrote was

very similar to the drawings of Leonard and Teresa. If a simple submariner could understand it, it would be impossible for others not to notice it... Soon after that show, the child disappeared from his home.

Looking even more anxious, Commander Testarossa stood up, then went to get a case of Cohiba Lanceros³⁸, Cuba's finest cigars. He lit one and offered them to me, but I politely declined, not being a smoker. Though even if I was, under those circumstances I would hardly be able to enjoy their exquisite fragrance. His voice was too serious, and I could not turn the conversation to a lighter subject. Later, when the Net developed, I tried to look for this case of the miracle Alaskan child, but could not find anything concrete about what happened to him later. But at that moment I only had a hypothesis - no, rather, a wild idea.

In the next ten years after that child's scribbles appeared on an obscure local talk show, a new form of war machines, the Arm Slaves, appeared and evolved very rapidly. Before we met with Commander Testarossa, before the 1980's the world's military technology was advancing at a natural pace - at least, that is what I thought. That pace became increasingly strange after the appearance of the "Alaskan prodigy", and consequently, because of children like Teresa and Leonard. Only later would I learn of the existence of the "Whispered" phenomenon.

After Commander Testarossa finished his story, it was my turn to ask:

- Why did you tell it to me?

- I can't really put my finger on it... intuition, I would say. We are now facing something that is outside of normal human knowledge, something very far from common sense. I've got that certain feeling, as if before a battle... I thought you were the person I had to tell it to.

- Mister Testarossa, you are overestimating me.

I wasn't a highly placed government official, or a renowned scholar, and not even an occult researcher - just another seaman fighting communists. Even having heard this story, I didn't think I could do anything to help. However, Carl Testarossa cautiously replied:

- No... I would like you to remember this, it may be useful in the future. It's... yes, same as that time. My sonar ping in that cold sea, my cry for help - you were probably the only commander who could understand it and continue fighting with me. That is why I told this to you.

He was right. If his words were not etched deeply in my head, later, when I left the Royal Navy and joined Mithril, in the critical moments of our toughest battles, I would not have been able to take the right decisions. When I later received outlandish orders from her, the ordinary me would have probably not trusted her enough. No, I would not even have chosen to follow her in the first place. It was all like his sonar ping... "I can still fight. Lend me your strength" - the voice in the depths of the ocean, the sound that still resonates within me, as I stand on the bridge of the most advanced warship in the world.

³⁸Note that the Lancero is actually a cigar size, relatively thin and long, favoured by Castro himself. One of the first three sizes introduced for the first time to the public in 1982.

* * *

Despite this eerie discussion, the rest of my stay was pleasant. Miss Teresa went to sleep early that night, and the next day we did not have many opportunities to talk, but she seemed like a gentle, well-behaved child. Most likely, she doesn't remember my visit now.

Carl was a very intellectual man, a great conversation partner, even if he had a penchant for lighter subjects and humorous anecdotes. Perhaps if his personality was different, he would never have thought of sending that sonar signal during the battle. We talked the whole night about our professional careers and our respective ships, without touching on confidential matters. Unfortunately I had work to do the next day, so we hurriedly ate breakfast at an especially early hour; Carl also had plans for the day, and as one of his subordinates came to pick him up in the morning, he was kind enough to take me to the city.

As a parting gift, he gave me a small package that he said I should open on the way home, and I was quick to thank him for it.

- I hope to see you again, Commander Mardukas.

- But of course. In the deep blue sea, then, - I said lightly, and he laughed.

- Yes indeed. The Mardukas-Testarossa combo knows no peer on the seven seas!

I laughed together with him as I got into the car that his deck officer was driving and left that beautiful place. Little did I know how right these last words were; only it would not be him, but his daughter I would be sailing with...

On the way home, I opened the package that he had presented me. It was light, and I could not guess what was inside; when I opened it, I saw an excellent cap, with "HMS TURBULENT S-87" embroidered in gold on the front. But it was a US Navy-style baseball cap, with the name of my ship - definitely an unusual present.

- Sir, - said the lieutenant, who was driving the car and who probably saw my puzzled expression in the rear-view mirror, - the captain found out about your habit of turning your regulation cap. Forgive me, but I heard about it myself. That you have to be careful when you meet the Royal Navy's "Duke" during manoeuvres, and especially so if his cap is turned backwards.

That was the first time I learned of that particular nickname. From the very beginning I was an ordinary person, and certainly did not hold such a title. The origin of it could easily be guessed, however - as a shortened version of my name, "Mardukas". It was somewhat embarrassing that Carl had found out about my habit since that time.

- I see. Your Navy caps are easier to turn around, hm?
- Yessir.
- Well, then, please tell your captain how grateful I am... even if I cannot wear it on duty.
- Thank you, sir. I would also like to say, sir, that I am very grateful. You saved our lives back there, sir.
- It was only the most efficient choice... by the way, I think I haven't heard your name yet.
- Sir, Lieutenant Sailor, sir, - answered the young officer in a nervous voice that amusingly contrasted with his large, muscular build.

Half a year later, I received a Christmas card from Commander Testarossa. In an enclosed letter he informed me that he was transferred to the Pacific fleet. He would live in Okinawa, and Teresa was apparently busy studying Japanese, which would be the fifth language she had mastered, and I thought that by the time we met again, she would know it perfectly.

However, the opportunity to meet Carl again would not come. We were both busy, and on top of that I had to worry about the problem of divorce with my wife, which dragged on for several years, and I felt awkward about seeing the harmony in Carl's household again. We continued exchanging letters frequently, but despite writing about it many times we did not meet. At that time I thought that we would meet eventually anyway.

My life in the second half of the 1980s was mostly unperturbed, devoted to duty. The only thing that changed was the trouble and eventual divorce with my wife, but even that did not affect my routine in the Navy in any significant way. The strange story that Carl told me that evening in Portsmouth also faded, and became a simple memory. The international situation, however, changed in an unpredictable way: first the peaceful change of regime in Poland, then the collapse of the Berlin wall. At the time people feared a repeat of the spring of Prague, but the USSR's leadership, and particularly Mikhail Gorbachev, were not prepared to send tanks on peaceful demonstrations (unlike the Chinese). He was a man who was truly seeking dialogue and reconciliation - everyone felt it. Everyone hoped that perhaps this mad era would come to an end, that this world, divided in two ideologically opposite part that threatened to kill the whole of humanity would finally fade into the past.

But it did not happen.

After the new decade had started, Saddam Hussein ordered the Iraqi army to invade Kuwait, and entered into the Gulf War with the Western countries who could not bear this affront. The flame of this war sparked a renewed conflict in Palestine and Tajikistan, where a separatist movement grew strong, - this was what became known as the Fifth Middle Eastern war. I was still in command of the "Turbulent", which took part in several secret operations before the outbreak of the war in the Persian Gulf. I could have been soon transferred to a comfortable desk job, or become an instructor at a naval academy, but I did not want to be separated from the sea, and I was clinging to my active duty.

My experiences in the waters of the Persian Gulf are, however, part of another story, and not directly related to this one.

Suffice to say, when the biggest disaster in the war happened, I was a thousand miles away in the warm waters of the Mediterranean. My ship was finally returning to its home port after being on duty for a prolonged period of time, hiding in the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Then, one day, a subordinate informed me that a nuclear weapon had been used in the northern part of Kuwait. American and British troops there had suffered heavy losses. An order from Headquarters immediately followed, ordering us to return to the theatre of war in range of our cruise missiles.

Anybody who watched the news at the time remembers well the chaos that followed this incident. An American soldier was being interviewed in live at that time. Then - an incredible flash over his shoulder, in the distance, behind the city; the camera that went white, registered a terrible noise, then was cut off.

At first no one could understand the real state of affairs on the ground. In a few hours, however, the United States government concluded that it was a nuclear weapon, launched by the order of Saddam Hussein, and hysterical demands for revenge followed. The Iraqi government made a feeble attempt at denying it, declaring that it was a charade performed by unknown actors. At first, the casualties were estimated at several thousand, but the next day it became clear that the real number was close to one hundred thousand. A frightening number.

A nuclear strike in retaliation, which would have been the fourth in human history, was fortunately avoided by frantic persuasion from the government of the USSR, but it remained unknown as to who actually used that nuclear bomb. Major media channels including the BBC and CNN reported it as Saddam's deed, and most people seem to believe that version. However, military staff had to have known that at that point in time the Iraqi army hardly had the capability to use a nuclear weapon. The Arab countries' relations with Israel by then had become irreparably damaged, and the fifth Middle Eastern war had begun. The fighting that begun then continues to this day.

But that was not the end of it.

Approximately half a year later, a coup d'état happened in the Soviet Union, and Secretary General Gorbachev was assassinated in the confusion. The new reactionary leadership seized control of the army, and once again invaded Afghanistan, from which the Soviet army retreated scarcely a year ago. And my work of patrolling and hunting for Soviet submarines, which had almost become leisurely, suddenly became as important as ever.

I was once dining with a superior officer from headquarters, and he asked me what I thought of the current military situation. I gave a honest, straightforward answer.

- Forgive me for saying so, but it is like a bad dream. Things have not been this bad since Khrushchev.

- Bad dream... Yes, maybe, - he frowned, - but because of this bad dream we are getting a much larger budget. Isn't that everything we could hope for?

I couldn't believe my ears. I understood his logic, but to think that an officer who has sworn to defend his country would utter such words seemed unthinkable.

- You think it strange, Commander? Think about it. If things went as Gorby thought, what would happen to the structure of the world, which was determined by the Cold war? The third world, which was more or less suppressed by both superpowers, would do whatever it pleases and soon drown in ethnic and religious conflict. The AK rifle and the landmine, instead of the nuclear bomb, would kill hundreds of thousands. Terrorism might have become a real problem. What if thousands of people died in London and New York? If you look at it this way, maybe this structure is necessary for the world.

I couldn't think of anything to answer. I had frozen with my knife and fork still in my hands, unable to speak, and the officer watched me intently.

- Wars break out systematically, - he said, - if you consider this, this structure of the world, born in the second half of the twentieth century, is by far the most peaceful system that has existed so far, wouldn't you agree?

- I... don't know, - was the only answer I could muster, - I am only a man who operates a weapon system to achieve maximum efficiency and results. I think it best to leave the political opinions to the more intellectual people in charge.

- ...Exemplary, Commander. You do not cling to opinions, but only think of yourself as the edge of the sword.

- Yessir, - I answered, my face as expressionless as I could possibly manage, but the officer eyed me curiously, then abruptly loosened up.

- But one of these days you won't be able to conceal that passion within you. No, please excuse me. i was just teasing you a little.

- Ah?..

- I only wanted to confirm something, please forget about it.

- Yes, Sir.

After that we went back the meal as if nothing happened.

This officer's full name was Edmond Mallory. Later I learned that he was the eldest son of Count Mallory, who was known as the founder of Mithril. Perhaps the connection is not exactly clear, but Mithril was born in the early years of the 1990's, it was practically founded after the disaster of the Gulf War and the Fifth Middle Eastern War. Now I realise that I had been tested by him if I was good enough to join the organisation. I received the actual invitation much later, after I had been fired by the Royal Navy, but I must have then caught the eye of Mallory Junior. What he said in this conversation became the reality that we would be fighting against.

The same could be said for Teresa Testarossa. She was not a vengeful person by nature, but fate had decided that this was her battle.

She was also fighting to atone.

Two years later I learned that both of her parents had died.

* * *

At the time when I learned of Commander Testarossa's death, that is, two years from the Kuwait Incident, I was caught up in another troubling affair in the Royal Navy that involved a submarine much like my "Turbulent". It was a fault with the reactor's cooling system, and while there were no casualties, it could have caused a high intensity radioactive leak that would spread it around the entire North Atlantic and coastal areas. Naturally, the mass media and the Labour Party were quick to jump on it and start a campaign against both the Conservative Party and the Navy. A special committee was formed, charged with investigating the responsible officers in the Navy. The latter went through rigorous questioning of their safety management and attitude towards classified information. I, as the commanding officer of a similar vessel, was called in as a witness. There were several issues with the reactor on the Trafalgar-class that became evident after close to ten years of usage.

The reason why those "deficiencies" were not repaired earlier were, of course, the costs in both time and budget funds. With the sudden radicalisation of the USSR, the fact that the navy's main force, their newest ships, had to sit in the docks, was also an important reason of this investigation. One had also to consider the fact that because of the crew's and the commanding officer's skill and caution, an accident with potentially serious consequences was successfully averted.

Be that as it may, deficiencies are deficiencies. As a witness before the commission, I was pressured by the upper echelons of the Navy to give a testimony that conformed to their reports that the Trafalgar-class submarines were perfectly safe and that the accident was caused by "human error".

I could not say that.

All things considered, the safety could not be called "flawless". One evening, after thinking about it for a long time, I told the committee the complete truth. My testimony was different from the report of the higher circles, and I knew that this meant the end of my career, but I could not lie, having given an oath before God and Her Majesty the Queen.

The differences between my version of the events and the reports was clear, and the following week I was relieved of command of the ship, and transferred to the editing house of the naval academy. My demotion was a lesson to others. Unless World War Three started, I could never even think of returning to the battlefield. This of course did nothing to lighten my mood, but on the other hand, it was only a

matter of time before I would have had to quit active duty and be forced to transfer to a desk job, for which I had no affection. So I lived quietly in Dartsmouth, immersing myself in military archives and history, and enjoying chess.

A month of this quiet routine had passed when I learned of the death of Carl Testarossa through a letter from one of his subordinates. I had written him a letter immediately after being demoted, but had received no answer. Carl died on land, not at sea. He had just returned from the sea to his house in Portsmouth - the very same house I visited - when apparently burglars came in. They shot Carl and Maria, and set the house on fire. Both children were missing.

At least, that was the story in the letter.

* * *

I caught myself thinking that I could not believe it, and immediately flew to the United States. I grieved deeply for the deaths of Carl and his wife, but I was even more worried because of what I heard about their children. I never met Leonard, but Teresa was a special case. To think that that pure, quiet little angel was kidnapped by some rascals was unbearable, and I felt like I had to do something. I wasn't a detective or a spy, so I could do little to help, even if I went there... and yet, I felt that I could not just continue wandering aimlessly on the naval academy grounds, burying myself in books.

I arrived in Portsmouth for the second time to find the city still in the grasp of winter. It was still morning, and my breath condensed in small white clouds of vapour that were dispersed by the breeze from the ocean. The officer who wrote me about Carl's death was on duty at sea, so he could not tell me the details of the case. Instead, I talked to the local officer in charge of the investigation.

- It's an outsider's work, no mistake, - told me the detective, - this is a quiet town, sir. If anyone had a problem with someone else, I'd hear about it. He probably took the money from their house and was out of the state by the end of the day. I've told everything to the FBI, too.

- What about the children? Why would the burglar take them?

- That's a classic case, sir. If he happened to meet the police, he'd hold 'em as hostages. Otherwise... well, it's tragic, but that's what happens - after they become useless he would have left them somewhere. They were beautiful children, I hear... such a pity...

- Don't talk about them like that! - I raised my voice without thinking.

The detective was, however, professional enough to understand the situation, and seemed to have expected my reaction.

- I understand your feelings, sir. But there's almost no way of finding them now, since it was an outsider's work... we could dig up the entire state and not find anything.

- Was it really an outsider? - I said, suddenly reminded of my conversation with Carl.

- Yea. Thirty-eight cal, three shots. Stole everything he could, then turned over a kerosene lamp and set fire to the place. Something like that.

- I can't believe it.

- You can believe what you want, sir. But the case is closed. There's nothing that's suspicious about it.

Leaving the police station, I rented a car and drove back to Carl's house. The mansion, which had completely burned down and was nothing more than a mound of charcoal, was covered with a thin blanket of snow. The silence was terrifying. I pulled on the neck of my greatcoat, and stopped for a moment to catch my breath. The little white clouds drifted and vanished in the now abandoned garden.

I stood there for a while, remembering my conversation with Carl in detail. The strange child prodigies... knowledge that could change the power balance of the world... Carl's fears... these thoughts swirled in my head as I walked around without any particular goal.

However, when I pushed a charred piece of wooden board that lie on the ground, I discovered several shell casings. I picked up one and wiped off the earth. I was not an expert in small arms, but even I could see those were rifle bullets, definitely not something fired from a small .38 calibre handgun. This could have come from an assault rifle - something a small-time burglar who was passing through the state could not possibly have. The detective had lied.

- So you've gone from sailor to sleuth, eh? - a voice called out to me from the distance.

I looked over my shoulder and saw a man who was walking to me from the forest. He was a middle-aged man with short dark hair with visible gray patches, wearing a thick winter coat and some extra clothes. When he got closer, I noticed that despite his large, imposing build, he had a very friendly face. That was Admiral Borda of the United States Navy.

I did not have a chance to talk to him personally, but I remembered his face well, as it appeared a lot in newspapers, in articles that had something to do with Navy matters or ceremonies. His breathing was a little heavy as he approached me at a brisk pace and smiled.

- So I finally get to meet the Duke himself, - noticing my stern look, he smiled again, - don't make that face, I'm not an assassin or anything.

- I know who you are, sir. I don't think I could, however, accept that you were passing here by chance...

- Hmm, you're right. I heard you came, so I walked here to meet you. We used to take long walks with Carl in this forest here, and along the beach.

- I see. So you have got surveillance here, - I looked around the ruins.

At a glance, it didn't look like a trap that was set up for me, but I was a complete amateur in these matters.

- Well, I won't deny it, but they're really for your own protection. Sorry if it made you uncomfortable.

- No, sir.

- Well... you came here because you want to know something, right?

- Yes, sir. What really happened here? Are Commander Testarossa and his wife really dead? What about the children?

- They were killed. It was a raid, - answered Admiral Borda dryly, rubbing his black gloved hands together, - some foreign intelligence agency came here to take away Leonard and Teresa. Just before that raid, Carl must have had a sense of something being wrong, and he called me for help. I was at the base, came here not twenty minutes later with five MP's, but... it was too late. Carl was dead, and they were preparing to take the children away by car... then a firefight broke out with a remaining part of the group that attacked the house. We managed to capture a couple alive, but before we could restrain them they took drugs and committed suicide. What remained was a burning house and the two children.

- So... the children are alive?

- In the custody of someone I trust. They've been reported as missing for their own safety, really, - after this Admiral Borda fell silent for a while. - Carl was a brave man. He held them off with a hunting rifle for more than ten minutes. They were six, and he managed to get two of them.

I heard that Admiral Borda's voice had become truly sorrowful, but there were many other things I had to ask.

- Why the MP's? If you had contacted the local police, and if they moved fast, they could have perhaps been able to get in time to save him.

- You mean, patrol cops used to a quiet neighbourhood, armed with standard .38 revolvers, against trained combatants with assault rifles? Even if several people came in time, it would only have increased the body count.

- But...

- What's done is done, - he looked at me with a grave face, - Don't you think I haven't thought about it? He was also my friend.

- I am sorry... then, Carl's children, where are they now?

His "trusted person" was no explanation for me.

- Now, now, - I can't tell you that. But they are safe, trust me.

- All right... in that case, at least tell me who attacked them.
- We don't really know that. Could be a domestic interest, or a foreign one. Could even be big business. We can't really say yet.
- How could they possibly be of any worth to them?
- Well... those children are quite unusual prodigies. Carl would, of course, stubbornly hide this fact. If I had realised earlier, perhaps this could have been prevented...

His voice darkened as he said that, but then something changed in his attitude. He lightly put his hands together and looked at me.

- Mister Mardukas... I came here to make you an offer.
- An offer?
- Yes, a... proposal. I know your current circumstances. Forgive me for saying so, but you find yourself now in the position of a jellyfish that has been washed ashore, on the sandy beach. Your splendid ability is being wasted, is drying away... So, what do you think - would you like to return to the sea once more, hm? - I was puzzled at the glint of mischief in his eyes. - I won't tell you the details. In fact, we do not know ourselves how this... project will turn out. If you decide to quit the Royal Navy, I understand that you would need a fake social identity... but that much we can guarantee. The important thing is that you will be able to return to the sea, to your battlefield.
- I don't think I quite follow you, sir, - I answered with some difficulty.

For some unknown reason I felt my heart pounding faster. I understood very well that he was not playing some sort of elaborate joke on me. Return... to the sea, to that capricious, perilous sea, to the place where I belonged?... His words were more enthralling than any sweet whispers of a beautiful woman.

- We will proceed with arrangements, - he turned his back towards me and paused before walking back into the forest, - to fight against this twisted world - we need your strength. If you decide that it is the right path for you - get in touch with me at any time this week.
- This week? But I...

He had already almost blended into the darkness between the trees.

- Be quick, but think carefully, Commander! I'll be retiring from military service next week, and you won't find me in the army...

* * *

I constantly thought about it on the plane back home. At the end, I could not resist the temptation. The prospect of leaving the Royal Navy after more than twenty years of service filled me with a sense of uneasiness, but as he said, I was like a jellyfish, washed ashore by the waves of time.

Two days after my return to Dartmouth, I contacted Admiral Borda from a pub, that was distant enough from my home, and told him I wanted to speak to him in person.

- Wait for half a year, Dick, - he said to me then, - a messenger will come to you around that time. Meanwhile, make sure to take care of any unfinished business you might have. Tell you the rest when we meet.

As he said, someone came half a year later, a man of around forty in civilian clothing who called himself Pennrose. He was accompanied by two other people. I followed him, and soon left England on a private jet that was clearly waiting for us. All the while he was asking me questions that ranged from whether I was under surveillance by any spy organisations, to the state of my health. Pennrose seemed to be a very knowledgeable man; he talked to me about the accident that caused my demotion in the Navy, and mentioned the more practical side, suggesting that my services would be very well compensated. From his way of speaking I could guess that he was most likely a scientist, but didn't get to know him well.

The trip took well over twenty hours.

We landed on what I could guess was the US Navy base on the island of Guam, changed to a helicopter, and after several hours arrived at our destination. Pennrose did not tell me anything then, but now I know: it was an uninhabited island in the Western Pacific. At that time it did not yet have a runway for fixed-wing aircraft. The helicopter landed in a clearing that served as an improvised helipad, and there were no other facilities to speak of.

The first person who came out to greet me on this lone island was none other than Admiral Borda. He was, however, accompanied by someone I very surprised to see: the officer I once had a strange conversation over lunch with, Sir Edmond Mallory, now dressed in a new, olive-coloured field uniform. He called out to me in a voice that I could hear even above the roar of the rotors.

- Glad to see you again, Commander!

I shook his hand in response, but seeing the bewilderment on my face, the three of them laughed.

- Ah, I see you haven't been told anything yet! This is going to become Mithril's West Pacific base. Welcome to Merida, Commander!

* * *

After exchanging greetings, my next logical question followed - what is "Mithril"? That word, unknown to me, came from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, and was a type of metal crafted by magic.

- We are something like an international rescue force, - said Admiral Borda then. - The original name was "Thunderbirds are coming", but... we decided to stick with this one. An organisation of that type, anyway. We don't however, rescue people from natural disasters - we extinguish the fires of regional conflict.

- I'm sorry, I don't think I understand it completely.

- Because it looks like World War Three is coming, - casually said Mallory, as if talking about tomorrow's weather forecast.

I then followed the three men as they left the helipad and took a narrow path through the jungle.

- It could happen tomorrow, in a year, in another five or ten, - he continued. - Small coals could ignite a big fire, leading the two superpowers to a direct confrontation. Now, as we entered the 1990s, this possibility is greater than ever. Even if among the hawks on both sides there are many who think they can control the situation, this simply isn't true. The conflict that now ravages the Middle East is only the beginning... it's going to get worse.

The path was not long, and after getting through some thicket we came to a small concrete structure, entered through a side door and got in a crude steel elevator. The warning buzzer sounded, and as Admiral Borda pressed a button on the controls, the elevator started going down with an awful clatter. As we descended into the shaft, daylight disappeared quickly, replaced by standard red emergency lights.

- To avoid this, "Mithril" was created. We couldn't entrust any single country with handling conflicts all across the globe. The scope of our operation isn't that big yet, but we already have forces equivalent to a regiment, or maybe a little more³⁹. We have special teams on everything from purely technological matters to strategy and tactics, intelligence gathering to operational analysis. And of course, a military task force for precise, surgical intervention... We would like you to work with the operational task force.

To say the least, I was surprised by the idea of such an organisation, but another thing struck me as even more strange.

- I'm sorry, but...

- Hmm?

³⁹ Considering Mallory is British, a regiment would be around 700 soldiers in 5 companies.

- I'm a submariner, sir. I wouldn't exactly perform well if assigned to a special forces unit. I don't exactly know the scope of "Mithril"'s operations, but I can hardly believe that it would possess a submarine?..

The three men exchanged glances, then started laughing. They were adults, dignified men, but at that moment they looked like boys who were hiding a treasured item of theirs on a hill behind their school.

- Aah, but please, come with us.

The elevator reached the bottom, and we moved forward into a dark passage - or, rather, some sort of cave. Water was dripping from the ceiling, and the air was pleasantly cool.

At the end of the passage was the entrance to a vast space. It was pitch-black, and I could only guess by the echo of our footsteps how large it really was.

- This is..?

Dr. Pennrose, without answering me, left our group, and, having grown accustomed to the darkness, I could see him operating some sort of power generator controls.

First came the sound of a small engine revving up, then the clicking of some switches. Then light from a multitude of powerful mercury lamps flooded this gigantic cave, and I reflexively squinted. I heard Mallory Junior say:

- You were saying something about a submarine, Commander?

Even though I could not open my eyes completely because of the strong illumination, but I immediately saw that shape. Most of the gigantic cave was occupied by an equally enormous body of water, which was probably a reservoir that connected to the ocean. We were standing on a small rocky platform overlooking this natural dock, and in the middle of it was a massive shape. Like a dragon out of legend, it seemed to sleep peacefully in this rocky cradle. There could be no mistake - it was a submarine.

It was gargantuan - no, I would say that its dimensions were *absurd*. Next to it my "Turbulent" and the "Dallas" would look like mackerel near a whale, and it even dwarfed the Soviet Typhoon-class SSBN. It looked like someone rounded the edges of a skyscraper and laid it horizontally. So enormous was its size that from where I stood, I could not see the ship's stern, because it melted into the darkness far ahead. The ship's originally pitch-black hull was covered in rust in many places, as if it really was a dragon, lying here for thousands of years.

- Let me present to you - Project 985, - said Admiral Borda, - a transport submarine that the Soviet Navy was building. It was supposed to transport a force to the enemy territory unnoticed, so that they could launch a surprise attack from it, anywhere on the globe. You know, Russians have the interesting quality of sometimes realising their ideas on a mindblowing scale.

- ...Russians? Why then... how is this ship here? - I uttered, almost trembling with awe.

- Well, you heard about their domestic problems. There simply wasn't any surplus money to finish a project of this scale. They were going to scrap it, or mothball it somewhere in the Arctic ports. Instead, we got our hands on it. We have some people on the inside, too. And in America, England, Israel, China... there are a lot more people that you'd think who share our ideas.

Even if what he said was true, I could not even begin to imagine the skill and discretion needed to successfully execute such a plan.

- So, Commander, as you can see, the ship is obviously incomplete. We would like to hear your thoughts - could it be used at all?

- No, it can't, - I responded immediately, - At least at first glance, it's ready for outfitting. Could we guess what the Russians planned and do the same? Well, that's not impossible... but it is simply not enough.

Despite my awe, I was expressing a purely rational, technical opinion. The Project 985 was simply too big. The designer was probably able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the assault of an Arm Slave echelon from it, but it would be impossible to bring this into the enemy's territorial waters and avoid detection. No matter how I thought about it, the speed could not exceed thirty knots, and the propulsion system needed for a submarine of this size would obviously emit a lot of noise, and once the enemy heard it, he would not let it escape. When it rose to the surface to permit troops to disembark, it would be immediately spotted by enemy radar, and escape would be even more difficult.

- I was honestly surprised by the ship itself. However, I doubt it can perform its function according to your expectations. To put it plainly, it would be sank on its first sortie, or captured, if it's lucky.

The three listened to my frank words very carefully, and when I finished talking, Mallory Junior turned to Borda and Pennrose.

- So... what do you think?

- Mister Mardukas gets a perfect score, - smiled Pennrose.

- Nope, doubly perfect, - Borda corrected him, - I can't see anyone else using her as efficiently.

They took my criticism as something quite natural.

- Commander Mardukas, you're absolutely right. However, imagine for a moment that these problems were solved. How would you use this ship?

- Well, - I personally thought that it would be impossible to solve them, but their question was completely serious, so I continued, - It would become a truly fearsome weapon... potentially it could transport up to one battalion to almost any spot on the globe, and after applying this considerable military strength, disappear like a shadow. Instead of air strikes or missiles that would destroy anything indiscriminately, this would be a weapon for a much more delicate intervention.

- That's right, Commander, - Mallory Junior was grinning broadly, - and we think we can put this weapon to use.

- But, that's impossible...

- We also thought that at first. When Mister Borda proposed to call you, we had thought of using a smaller, "normal" submarine, or even a landing craft disguised as a merchant vessel. But as we got help from a... co-worker, the situation changed.

- Co-worker?..

- I believe you have already been introduced to her. Here, take a look at this, - saying this Pennrose handed me a sheet of paper.

Still doubtful, I started looking through it, and the three men engaged in small talk, waiting for me to finish. It was an incomplete treatise, describing several possibilities, technical details, and necessary components that would together make this submarine a state-of-the art weapon: the application of the ECS; propellers made from a special shape memory alloy that drastically reduced the noise; a powerful palladium reactor adapted for use within a ship, a "smart" hull with electromagnetic flow control; implementation of superconductivity for propulsion systems; measures against magnetic detection; extraordinarily complex AI that would control the functions of the warship.

I could barely believe my eyes, and continued to mutter "wonderful... extraordinary!" under my breath. I would never forget the excitement that came over me at that moment. It was the same overwhelming emotion as when I had tasted that wonderful dinner prepared by Carl's wife.

There were, of course, challenges. The budget, facilities and trained men, they were all necessary. It wasn't a simple matter, to refit a warship, even with a solid theoretical basis. But it became something tangible, and not just a dream. If all the practical problems were solved, this ship could be born anew.

- Like it, hm? - smiled Borda.

I could not say I was not impressed, but who was it that created this incredible document? Was it a genius scholar or veteran technician? Yes, I had the feeling that the person who wrote this knew the practical application of these systems.

- You said "she", earlier? Who is-

- Ah, our angel, she is, - laughed Borda, but then, as if remembering something, suddenly became serious. - She is cooperating with us because she thinks that nuclear incident in Kuwait was her fault.

I could not understand where he was going.

- It was a nuclear strike using ECS - yes, the nuclear missile itself had an ECS field. And as the person who invented that system, even though her responsibility is indirect, she still feels guilty about it... very much so.

I was silent for a moment, taking in the meaning of his words. Fighting to atone... Even if she does not show it, that feeling is still there, deep in her heart.

* * *

My new life began. Having retired from the military, for the public at least I became an employee in some maritime transportation company. Officers retiring from the Navy would often find themselves employed in maritime trade and related security firms, so it was a perfect disguise.

Pretending to be a normal businessman, I was overseeing the rebirth of Project 985. The plan of the ship's reconstruction was overseen by the girl, and I travelling around the world, making sure it would come to fruition. The new palladium reactor was built by Rolls-Royce, the propulsion systems in Newport News⁴⁰, the EMFC⁴¹ was developed by Geotron⁴². And of course, there were hundreds of other enterprises connected to the project.

And yet this project remained completely secret. The parts were sent separately, by a multitude of carefully planned routes, so that no one could guess what these parts were for. You would say that even though it was carefully planned, hiding it perfectly would be impossible - but there was the base.

First of all it was necessary to build at least a minimally functional shipyard and outfitting dock inside Merida island. For security reasons, we had to operate with a minimum number of workers, but even then supervising their work was not by any means easy. I heard that in Medieval Japan labourers working on the construction of castles who tried to escape were killed on the spot, - but we could not use such methods. Workers were carefully selected and shipped from different places without revealing the location of Merida island, and we did not try to dismiss the construction as something trivial: instead, we let leak rumours that this base was somehow linked to the CIA, more precisely, a secret facility to study aliens, built to replace Area 55⁴³. Though even with the collaboration of the intelligence department and the research division, it was very difficult to keep the real purpose of the base hidden.

The budget's scale was quite frightening, even though this was a single repair operation. If we compare a normal submarine's refit to a 50-dollar drainage pipe repair, then this one would cost over 300 dollars. The budget problem was the first one I talked about to Borda and the others, but they just waved it

⁴⁰ Not to be confused with the newspaper, the facility in question is Northrop Grumman's shipyard in the city of Newport News, Virginia.

⁴¹ The Black Technology in question is, of course, Electro Magnetic Fluidics Control; in reality a similar principle is called Electromagnetic Flow Control, which theoretically reduces drag in water using alternating electromagnetic fields; all part of Magnetohydrodynamics, a field which had been generating military interest since the Cold war, when work on MHD propulsion systems was started.

⁴² You may remember Geotron Electronics as being the developer, for example, of main systems on Clouzeau's M9 Falke.

⁴³ Looks like a mistake in the original text, he's got to be talking about Area 51.

away, and I still do not understand from where they had gotten it. I heard that the Mallory family possessed a vast fortune, but it alone could not have covered the costs of the project. It quite evident that there had to be a great number of investors. With the connections of House Mallory, it was not impossible to attract a number of very wealthy investors, but what about the rest of the money?.. However, let us not dwell on this further. My main concern was whether I could make this ship as perfect as was expected of me.

* * *

We were creating the most powerful warship in the world, supported by experimental, cutting-edge technology, which naturally brought its own specific problems. Even if it was called a "refit" of Project 985, the reality was that we were almost starting from scratch, and a veritable army of other people from the military, like me, worked on the project. The designer, however, was never seen. She only sent the research team, which soon became a division, precise instructions for minute adjustments. There were, of course, many skilful engineers on the team, but there was no one else who could grasp the entirety of the complex picture of the ship's systems, adapt to the requirements of the moment and cope with immediate challenges in that way.

Every system was vital to the ship we were building, and every one of them was extremely complex and precise, - something I could not deal with, and only "she" could. I was getting tired of playing the telephone game and only exchanging faxes. One day I finally lost my temper and informed Admiral Borda that I would quit the project if I could not meet "her" personally. He seemed to have been expecting this, and only shrugged in response.

- OK. I thought it was heading this way. Seems she wasn't too pleased, either. We'll hand her over to your care then.

And one day I finally met her. The one who designed the world's most powerful warship. Teresa Testarossa.

It was eight years since I last saw her. But this whole time, she was doing all this work? This little girl? Remembering Carl's words, however, I could at the very least accept the facts.

I will not forget her first words to me.

- Mister Mardukas. I'm frankly shocked at your performance. Why is the rewriting of the BYS-2 system software taking two days already? I could have done it in two hours!

I could not even take offence at these words. She was, after all, only twelve, but more importantly, when I heard her talk in that audacious voice, memories rose from deep within my heart.

Carl... You, who gave your life for your daughter's, now reproach me through her.

Teresa was then much smaller than today, even more lithe and fragile, and only those large eyes that reflected her incredible mind were the same. She wasn't even wearing a uniform, but some kind of suit that looked like a school dress.

- If things go on like this, I'll get old before this ship is complete!

- Indeed...

- I got permission from Uncle Jerry - I mean, Admiral Borda. I'll be on this island until she's ready, - saying that, she extended her tiny right hand to me, even though it did not look like she was really expecting a handshake. - So, please compile a report on the progress first. Then we'll talk... and I hope it will be constructive.

I gave her a dry smile, said "Aye, Ma'am" and raised my hand in mock salute. This was to be my first salute to her. When I recognised her as my commanding officer, naturally my salute would become a sincere symbol of respect, but that happened somewhat later. That is an interesting enough story in itself, but it is best left for another time, for I would have to recount in detail an entire submarine campaign.

In any case, several years later, Project 985, which had almost ended its days tragically, was reborn as the amphibious assault submarine "Tuatha De Danann", which would have been impossible without Teresa. As to me, I became the executive officer of the ship, a position that I proudly hold to this day.

[A Gluttonous Comrade]

A patrol car, its siren wailing monotonously, passed Kaname and the others, who were walking home from school. It was followed by the local fire brigade truck, and the droning of a helicopter came from somewhere high above. The neighbourhood was really noisy today for some reason, and yet there seemed to be less people out in the street than usual.

Kaname frowned, and looked at Kyouko and Sousuke, who were walking with her as usual.

- I wonder what's up with them today... All this noise, and the place looks deserted.

- Eh... How'd I know.

- Don't know. The current situation reminds me of a coup d'état somewhere in the Philippines or Thailand... There may have been suspicious movements by the JSDF lately, - was Sousuke's completely serious reply.

- ...No way, you've been quiet today, haven't you? Maybe they're chasing some slasher.

- In that case, there's no problem, shoot him on sight.

Kaname sighed, and remembered their previous discussion. She looked at a couple of photographs that Kyouko gave her not long ago, and smiled despite herself.

- Aaw, it's so cute! Four months old, right?... looks like a plush toy...

The little, but extraordinarily fluffy ball of fur in the picture lie on some kind of towel, and was looking at the camera with half-closed eyes. It was an American Shorthair kitten that Kyouko's family recently took in. On the next picture the kitten was trying to grab the suckling bottle with a tiny, fluffy paw. On the next one it was staring at the camera, its perfectly round eyes giving it that unmistakeable, innocent look that would make anyone's heart melt with tenderness.

- Hehe, isn't it the cutest thing ever. During lunch break, I showed it to Akutsu and the others⁴⁴... You should have seen her desperately trying to keep up her tough act!

- Aha-ha, I can imagine. So, what's it called?

- Mia-chan, - grinned Kyouko.

Kaname grimaced - it was the same as a girl at school that she was on bad terms with.

⁴⁴Kyouko must be referring to Mari Akutsu, the leader of that gang that kidnapped Kaname. I'm sure you remember that episode of Fumoffu!

- The name blows. Next time we're at your place, we'll take a picture of her ass and-

- N- No!! Don't! And Mia-chan's a boy!

- Ah, right... Well, anyways. I'd love to have a cat, too... even though it'd be difficult, with me living alone,
- sighed Kaname.

- But, Chidori, you already have a hamster. If you got a cat or some other animal, your hamster would become its first meal. Though it probably isn't even one full-size ration, - said Sousuke, and Kaname gazed at him menacingly.

- He-ey - are you always looking at my sweet little Hammy⁴⁵ like that?!

- No. I am only warning you about the often ferocious behaviour of cats.

- Ferocious?! Have you even seen the incredible cuteness in the pictures here? You just have to turn anything into a murder story!

"Ouch" was Sousuke's reply, because Kaname gave him a good kick in the back. Kyouko, watching them, murmured:

- Well, in a way, Kana-chan already has a doggy...

Sousuke, not hearing these very truthful words, moved a little further from Kaname and continued as if nothing had happened.

- Chidori. I understand what you are trying to say. But you shouldn't lose your head over a hamster or a kitten. Your owner's pride is meaningless.

- Wha-at?!

- I didn't tell you about it, but I also have a cat.

Sousuke... keeping a pet? It was surprising to say the least, but Kaname folded her arms and looked at him skeptically.

- Hmm, you? A cat?

- Yes. And he's nothing like your hamster, or Tokiwa's kitten.

- Really?

- A beautiful, big white cat. I call him Whitey.

- Whitey?... How long did it take you to come up with that?

⁴⁵ The real "name" is an untranslatable portmanteau of "hamster" and "love" (call him Hamski, if you want, because that's how it's pronounced). I just went with the first English version I could find/think of.

- "Simple is best". White, so Whitey. No problem.

- Hmph, - Kaname was smiling scornfully. At best he'd picked up some stray around here, luring him with food. - Beautiful white fur, eh? Better than my Hammy, eh? Well, why don't you show us your wonderful cat!

Sousuke only shrugged in response.

- I don't mind. You've been helping me at school, the least I can do is introduce you to Whitey.

- Oh, really? Well, let's go to your place then. What about you, Kyouko?

- Let's, let's! Sagara-kun was making fun of our Mia-chan, I can't let this pass! - Kyouko also looked unusually offended.

- It's decided, then, we're coming.

- I don't mind, but first, - Sousuke checked his watch and looked at the nearby supermarket, - I have to buy food for Whitey. Please wait for me here.

He walked away quickly towards the shop, and Kaname and Kyouko immediately started whispering to each other.

- Wow, that's a surprise. Sagara-kun keeping a pet?

- And - a cat?..

Meanwhile two more police cars, their sirens blaring, drove past the two girls. When Sousuke got out with an unusually large bag, they followed him to his apartment.

- By the way, I don't think I've been in Sagara-kun's room before, - said Kyouko suddenly.

- Really?

- Kana-chan, you come here often?

- Ah... umm... no... well, sometimes.

Kaname's room was in the next building.

Kyouko gave her a mischievous glance and muttered something that sounded like "aha!" under her breath.

- What? What is it?

- Oh, no nothing, nothing at all, hehe.

Kyouko also knew that she often ended up having dinner with Sousuke and generally spent a lot of time with him. But these days they often did their laundry together. "We're both living alone, so washing

them together is more economical. Besides, if I hang men's clothing on my balcony, burglars wouldn't risk coming in." She could reason like that, but no matter how you looked at it, it made them look suspiciously close, so she wouldn't tell anyone, even Kyouko. It was quite normal for a daughter to do her laundry separately from her father, - washing the shirts of a friend would really make them seem intimate. But enough about that...

- Hm... I can't get my key like this. Please hold this for a moment.

Sousuke stopped in front of his room and handed the bag over to Kaname and Kyouko. It was packed, and very heavy. Kaname peered inside and frowned.

- What's this? It's full of meat?..

Sousuke, without answering, opened the door, and before going in told them with a mysterious face:

- Watch your step. You might trip on boots or ammunition boxes. Whitey! I'm home! You must've been lonely here, haven't you?

Kaname and Kyouko came into the living room after Sousuke, who was calling the cat. It hadn't changed much: the same impressive amount of weapons, ammunition crates, bulletproof vests and camo clothing. And from behind the bed, Whitey rose to greet them.

They heard a low growl. Normally, a cat would meow or purr in greeting, but Sousuke's "cat" *growled*. When it emerged from the shadows, they saw that it was a full two and a half metres from head to tail, more than a meter high, and weighed, at first glance, no less than two hundred and fifty kilogrammes. Its beautiful, gleaming white fur was laced with geometrically perfect black stripes. Its strong, but supple legs together with the growling gave it a distinct resemblance to a motorbike. A large cross-shaped scar covered its left eye, which didn't open.

The "cat" yawned, displaying a perfect set of fangs. Those jaws could easily sever Kaname's neck in one bite. It growled again, as Kaname and Kyouko remained frozen, without even breathing. She thought she was used to everything - weapons, bombs, mines, but this... this was something new.

They were still staring at Whitey, speechless, when he, growling, approached Sousuke and extended a large, white paw in greeting. Sousuke caught the paw - it looked like he had to brace himself to not be thrown off his feet - and started caressing the large animal's head. This "caress" was far from gentle, and it looked like he was vigorously scratching him. Whitey seemed to give him a gentle bite, then proceeded to lick his face with a tongue the size of a dust cloth.

- Yes, you're a good boy, go-od boy! You've been taking the care of the house when I was away, right?

Only the heavy breathing and the slurping sound of the cat's tongue were heard inside the room.

- Hey... you... that...

This was all Kaname could manage. She and Kyouko were ready to jump out of the room at any moment.

- This is Whitey. Aren't we a beautiful cat?

- No! This is a *tiger*!

- Well, they're cats, too, - answered Sousuke casually, pushing away the tiger's head. This rare, white tiger was playfully licking his head, and he looked like he had just taken a shower. The tiger growled expectantly.

- Ah, Whitey, I got it. Hungry, aren't we? Well, you can eat as much as you like, - said Sousuke and pointed at Kaname and Kyouko, who let out a small whimper.

- A- are you planning to let him eat us? - Kaname and Kyouko reflexively leaned back against the wall and paled noticeably.

- Of course not. Just give me that meat.

It dawned upon them that they were carrying a bag full of raw meat. They gasped in horror and immediately dropped it. Whitey jumped on it in a flash, tore open the bag with his claws and started to devour the contents. Blood and juices were flying everywhere, and the sound of crunching bones was positively chilling.

- Don't we have a healthy appetite? Good boy... Whitey is a real glutton.

- T-that's not really the problem here-...

- I'm now buying the meat from the supermarket and the butcher, but if I had a large enough refrigerator, then I would be able to keep a couple hundred kilogrammes of beef here. The expenses, however, would still be significant.

He had not finished talking yet, when they heard that someone was talking through a loudspeaker outside. At first they thought it was some kind of publicity campaign, but it turned out to be a municipal car, with loudspeakers on the roof.

"... caution. Once again, we ask citizens to stay in their homes for their own safety. If you are only coming back home, please make sure all the doors and windows are closed. Even if the windows are high, the tiger can very easily come in through them.

I repeat: last night, a male Bengal tiger escaped from its cage in the Fuchuu neighbourhood, where it was being raised. The tiger has not yet been caught, but it had been spotted in Choufu, near Tamagawa river and Shimoishihara. It is thought that the tiger may now be hungry. We ask citizens to stay in their homes for their own safety. If you are only coming back home, please make sure all the doors and windows are closed..."

The puzzle was solved. The patrol cars, fire trucks and helicopters, and the absence of people on the streets - it was all because of him. Yes, when they were coming out of the school gates, they heard

Kagurazaka-sensei shouting at some students to get back into the school building. They didn't pay much attention to her and soon forgot about it...

- Don't worry, Chidori. As far as I know, Whitey didn't eat anybody.

- Grrrm, - affirmatively growled the tiger.

- Y-...yo-ou!!

Without even thinking about the tiger, Kaname charged Sousuke and landed a full-strength blow with her harisen. Fortunately for her, Whitey appeared to be too busy with his food, and only glanced at the beaten Sousuke once before continuing to crunch a particularly juicy bone.

- That hurts, Chidori.

- You ass! - yelled Kaname, not noticing Kyouko, who was trying to restrain her. - First it was guns, then bombs, now it's a tiger! A tiger!!

- He's just a big cat.

- No he's not!! - Kaname was shaking Sousuke by his collar.

Seeing this, Whitey let out an anxious low-pitched whine. His master was evidently being threatened by this unknown female.

- Where did you get him? Explain, right now!

- Hm. It could be a long story, - Sousuke moved away, folded his arms, and looked at the ceiling, as if trying to remember the details. - Two years ago, I was fighting as a mercenary in Southeast Asia. More precisely, on the side of the anti-government guerrillas in Myanmar...

Speaking of Myanmar, an ordinary Japanese would only remember Suu Kyi's constant house arrests⁴⁶. In reality, that country suffered because of the constant imposition of military regimes, and the ethnic minorities continued to wage a guerrilla war against the government troops. Sousuke joined the former just as open hostilities began. During the campaign he was engaged in an infiltration operation with a small partisan group near the Chaukamba mountain ridge on the Indian border.

- Details aside, I was with the troops of the anti-government movement of North Myanmar. There was no hope of allied support on that kind of terrain. Then, because of one soldier's mistake - name was Hema, as far as I can remember - we were spotted and forced to engage the enemy. To lure them away, I separated from the group, and when I was wading through the jungle alone, I met this fellow here.

⁴⁶ Aung San Suu Kyi is the most well-known opposition politician of Burma/Myanmar, and daughter of Aung San, who negotiated the state's independence, and ironically enough, founded the state's army. She has been under house arrest for most of the last twenty years.

Sousuke's eyes were gazing far away, as if he was seeing his memories unfold that very moment. He was gently stroking the back of the tiger, who was almost purring from bliss after the great meal.

- He was still a kitten then. A stray bullet probably killed his mother, and he himself was injured - see his left eye? That's a mark from that time. If I had just let him go, he'd probably have died, so I did what I could, and looked after him for some time. The enemy's encirclement was pretty tight anyway, and I couldn't move much. Once even his mother's corpse, because of the smell, served us as a cover from their patrols.

Kaname could only stare at him and mumble something unintelligible.

Several days later, an opportunity to escape the enemy's encirclement presented itself. Whitey by then could walk a little, but getting through the dense jungle with him in tow would be too difficult, and risking your own life for him would be unreasonable. If Sousuke was caught, the tiger cub would probably be shot, and he himself would be subjected to inhuman torture.

- It couldn't be helped. I had looked after him for a while, then left him half of my food supplies and left that place. I did not honestly think he would survive. After I returned to the base, I remembered him often.

After that, he told about the injured white tiger cub to another Japanese mercenary, who didn't seem to pay much attention to it. However, that former comrade in arms contacted Sousuke the day before yesterday. It appeared that he had now become a smuggler of highly valued animals, and as he received news of a white Bengal tiger with a scar on the left eye, he remembered Sousuke's story, and asked him if it was possible that it was the same tiger. Sousuke, naturally, could not just let him be.

- On top of everything, he was being held captive nearby. So I got him out of that warehouse yesterday night. It's him all right, the one I met in Myanmar. From what I overheard, they were planning to poison him, and then send him to a taxidermist to make a stuffed animal for some rich client. I could not allow it, of course, - Sousuke sat cross-legged near Whitey and gently clapped his back, - so I... opened his cage and took him home.

The tiger was purring like a small motorcycle by now, his eyes partly closed. Sousuke was looking at him fondly and scratching his cheek. There was a very unusual sense of closeness between the two, and one really couldn't say that the tiger wasn't behaving just like a large, good natured cat.

- Well... I understand the circumstances, mostly, - said Kaname, lightly massaging her temple with a finger, as usual in these cases. - But are you really planning to raise him? You saw what they're doing to the neighbourhood to find him.

- That will calm down in a while.

- No it won't! Besides, while people think there's a tiger out there, they'll be afraid to even come out of their houses!

- They shouldn't be. As I said, he does not attack humans.
- All right, but even so, think about it - he's a tiger raised in the wilderness! You can't just lock the poor thing in this room forever! If I was in his place, I'd get neurotic after a while!
- No problem. I'll take him out for a walk every night. Last night, too, I let him run around a bit - as a predator, he's got some nocturnal habits, you know. Started marking his territory.
- See what you did to the neighbourhood?! Think about the trouble you're causing for other people!
- I'll raise him responsibly, believe me.
- That's not the problem, you've got to understand that it's realistically impossible! You simply can't keep a tiger in an apartment! Give him back!
- But if I do that, he'll die.

Kyouko, watching them bicker, murmured to herself:

- It's as if the boy picked up a poor little kitten on a rainy day, and the mother's scolding him...

The two, of course, did not hear her.

- Well... then send him back to Myanmar or wherever you met him! It's all for his own good!
- Definitely not. Because of the civil war, the place where Whitey lived is now full of landmines. And the area is succumbing to deforestation. If he goes back there, he won't be able to survive.
- So, what can you do?
- As I said, I'll keep him here.
- Jeez, you're impossible, - Kaname sighed deeply, and scratched her head. - Do whatever you want, but I don't want to know anything about it - hey-- he-ee!..

Whitey playfully stretched out a paw, caught her and pushed her down, grumbling affectionately.

- Hm, Whitey seems to like you. Isn't he a cute cat... maybe you'll reconsider, Chidori?

Kaname shrieked as Whitey started licking her face. Kyouko was still trembling near the wall.

* * *

The food expenses for the tiger were so considerable that even Sousuke admitted it was a problem, but they postponed the decision for later, and that evening something else happened.

Kaname was already in her pyjamas, getting ready to sleep, when she heard sirens outside, much louder than usual. Some people were shouting.

Kaname yawned, stretched a hand to get the phone⁴⁷, and dialled Sousuke's number, a suspicion forming in her mind.

- Hey... did something happen?..

- Ah. Chidori. Well, it looks like... Whitey escaped. I went to the shop to buy more food, and it looks like he broke down the door. It was time for his walk, after all.

The tiger was probably running around somewhere close, and she could hear the tension in Sousuke's voice. It cleared her head, and she got up immediately.

- Ah, see?! What are you going to do now?

- The situation is really out of control...

- Great, just great! So, where are you now? - asked Kaname, hurriedly putting on a jacket over her pyjamas.

- I'm searching the nearest blocks. Right now I'm on the Keiousen bridge on the Tamigawa, but... Whitey likes bushes near rivers...

- So, what? With all your weapons, you're afraid of the big scary suspicious gentlemen that wander around there?

She saw a patrol car and a TV truck pass her block. In the back of the truck were hunters in their typical vests, hunting rifles at the ready.

- I thought it would turn out right, somehow...

- Good grief, that's what I've been saying, it's impossible to keep him! Find him quickly, hand him over and it'll be all right.

A moment's silence followed on the other end of the line, then she heard Sousuke's voice - it was strained, as if he was fighting to keep it steady.

- I can't... What they're saying about him in the newspapers and on TV are all lies. They're practically saying Whitey eats people, and that they're going to shoot him on sight.

- So... what can you do?

- I'll deal with the hunters that are chasing him.

⁴⁷ Note: in the text it says "PHS" - the Personal Handy-phone System, a communications standard used extensively in Asia. Something like your regular cordless DECT, with a few cellphone-like capabilities.

A metallic sound, most likely a silencer being attached to a submachine gun.

- Well if you end it quickly... no, wait!

- He's a comrade in arms, - Sousuke responded in a very serious tone. - When I was surrounded by the enemy, he was the only one with me. We both shared the same food, the same pain, and both held our breath when the patrols came. I cannot abandon a comrade.

At that moment, she heard shouts over the telephone. An angry voice was yelling "There! Get back! Come around, dammit!" Sousuke's voice became even more tense.

- Whitey's in danger. Got to go help him.

- Hey... wait a second!

- Thankfully, he's not hungry, so don't think he'll attack humans. Anyway, I'm going to fulfil my responsibilities as owner to the end.

- No! Don't! It's dangerous! Do you hear me, Sousuke?!

He hung up, not paying attention to her pleading.

What happened then was too fast to grasp. The world was ignorant of Sousuke's presence and identity, and the incident remained a local mystery. The tiger was surrounded by hunters at the Tamagawa riverbed, but then Sousuke, stealthy as a ninja, "dealt" with the hunters with a stun gun and tranquilizer pistol, one by one, and the police and fire brigade, watching from a distance, got their share of smoke grenades and flashbangs. The news helicopter, watching the scene from above, got a bullet in one of its hydraulic systems, and hastily left the scene. It was Sousuke's way of non-lethal combat, even though it was obviously violent from any normal person's point of view.

Having driven all the "enemies" away, Sousuke carefully snuck close to Whitey, who looked scared by all the racket around him.

- Whitey, are you all right?

- Grrhm! - the two hundred and fifty kilo tiger jumped at Sousuke and gave him an almost human hug, his whine sounding as if he was crying.

- Aah, good boy, good boy! Even if I didn't give you permission to go out... this town's even more dangerous than your forest, you understand?

- Rrrm...

- Well, if you, that's all right. I bought you a dozen prince melons for your afternoon snack. Let's go back now.

- Grrm!!

- Don't you dare to come back!! - Kaname crawled seemingly out of nowhere, and struck Sousuke on the back of the head with her harisen.

- That hurts, Chidori.

- Grrnn...

The boy and the tiger looked at her in protest. Her pyjamas were smeared with mud, she was wearing some old sandals and a thin jacket hung loosely on her shoulders.

- I thought we hid well enough...

- I'm starting to read the pattern of your movements lately, you know! With all that's happening!

- Ah, intuition that develops on the battlefield, I see.

- More like, my responsibility as owner... anyway, now that you've caused such a racket, you can't just go back, can you?

- Hm. I intercepted on the police radio a call for reinforcements here. If I set up Claymores⁴⁸ and lure them there together, I could get them all at once...

- No you won't! - Kaname pinned Sousuke to the ground, and Whitey, seeing this, growled defensively.

- Grrrrmm...

- It's all right, Whitey. She is ferocious, but she won't attack tigers unless she is hungry. However, as she is quite easily provoked, it's better not to do anything that agitates her.

- Grm.

- Ahem... Is it all right for me to start acting like a ferocious, easily excitable animal RIGHT NOW?

Kaname's shoulders were already shaking in anger, but at that moment, they heard shouts from very close by the bushes they were hiding in.

- Here, here! There's a bloodstain!

- Careful, everyone!

- Tranquilizers won't work! Shoot on sight!

It looked like the pursuers were approaching fast and encircling the scene. The situation became even more desperate.

But... a bloodstain?

⁴⁸ The directional anti-personnel mine, not the manga or Scottish sword.

- No problem. It's just a scratch, - said Sousuke, wiping the sweat from his brow. Only now she noticed that his right shoulder and upper arm were covered in blood. - One of the hunters had unexpectedly resisted to the stun gun. It turned out he had a knife, and I had a bit of trouble with him. Don't worry, I've only incapacitated him.

Kaname was speechless, and could not understand why Sousuke would go that far to protect the tiger... but then she realised: it was how he always acted. He always put all of his energy into protecting his friends and companions. Same with her... protecting her even when he was badly hurt...

- That's an... unexpected rival, - she muttered.

- Eh? What?

- Grnn?

- No, nothing... so, what are we going to do now? - said Kaname, fighting to keep her voice steady. - I said already that it's not possible to keep him like you planned. Whitey's a good boy, and doesn't eat people, I got it, but...

- Aha?

- Grm?

Said Whitey and Sousuke in unison.

- But that doesn't really change the fact that he's a pretty dangerous animal who can kill a human in one blow. You can't just treat him like any other small pet.

- I don't agree. If we try, he can also adapt to life here.

- I'm telling you, he can't.

- No, he can, - Sousuke's answer was unusually firm. - I also found it hard in the beginning, but now I'm confident I can adapt. Whitey is no exception. One must adapt to survive.

Kaname couldn't find anything to answer.

- He's is a strong fellow. He'll get used to this town, too.

It was obviously an absurd belief, without any reasonable basis - but for some reason Kaname couldn't laugh it away. The reason he brought up was too serious. Yes, Whitey may really be a comrade in arms for him. It was impossible, but a life was at stake.

- But... no matter how you look at it, keeping him is just impossible, - she finally said, and it seemed that Sousuke and Whitey both sighed feebly.

- I understand. I think my apartment's contract allows no pets, either.

- That's not the problem...

- And I would not return him to the minefields in Myanmar. I'm at a loss, - he concluded in a very gloomy voice.

- Sousuke...

- I got it. I've got a great plan. I know a place for him to live in, with much more room than my apartment. I'd also be able to look after him there at any time. I'll get him there this evening, - his voice suddenly became very clear. - And we wouldn't have to worry about any danger to society. A former comrade from Cambodia had a tiger, who died recently of old age. I'll get the corpse tomorrow, and with a little trickery we'll be able to persuade them to close the matter, make it seem that Whitey died.

- You could've remembered that earlier!..

- Anyway, let's get out of here.

Believing Sousuke, Kaname helped him take Whitey out of the encirclement. This was again an operation in his style. Breaking through the hunters and the firemen wasn't easy, but somehow they got through without a scratch.

Sousuke told her that he and Whitey would be fine afterwards, and leaving them she went home and immediately fell asleep.

* * *

It was a break between classes. The teacher in charge of English for class 2-4, Eri Kagurazaka, had just finished correcting a vocabulary test, and decided to get some fresh air on the rooftop. There wasn't anything else to do, and the view from the rooftop was splendid, especially in that weather.

On the door to the rooftop was a recently posted sheet of paper that read: "Do not enter. Used by Sagara." Eri thought it was strange, but not paying heed to the warning went out anyway. She opened the door, and came face to face with a big, white tiger.

Eri let out the single loudest shriek of her professional career, and promptly fainted. Whitey, in good mood, as usual, proceeded to lick her face thoroughly.

After being repeatedly hit by Kaname, Sousuke finally accepted the idea that the school rooftop was not the best place to keep a tiger.

- So, where did you put him finally? - asked Kyouko a few days later during lunch. Several people from the class were cheering loudly behind them as the Hanshin team was rushing to victory. Kaname, a big fan of the Giants, was pouting silently⁴⁹.

- On an island in the West Pacific, - told her Sousuke. - It's a military manoeuvring ground, and they have a problem with wild pigs breeding too fast. Whitey won't lack food... but I think he'll be lonely. A shame, really...

By the way, in the report he had submitted to the commander of that base was only mentioned "one cat". The commander immediately imagined a cute kitten, and signed the report without further questions - an action that she would later regret...

⁴⁹ The teams in question are the Yomiuri Giants (sometimes known as Tokyo Giants), and the Hanshin Tigers (clever, clever...).

[Atogaki]

This book is a revised compilation of short stories originally published in Dragon Magazine. It contains two stories with a more serious tone, and one story from our characters' school life. The title of this book, by the way, comes from military terminology - a "side arm" is the weapon you would carry on your "side", that is, near the hips or lower back. Whereas a soldier's "main" weapon would be a rifle, a pistol usually serves as a side arm. And so, the short school story complements the two long ones, like a sidearm would complete a soldier's equipment. In the last "Side Arms", if you remember, a similar story was about Tessa suddenly coming to school, then going to the hot springs, played the same role. Here, Kalinin and Mardukas take the lead with their gloomy stories, and besides the story about the tiger, there's no comedy, so forgive me for this darkened mood!

That said, I have to include here some long, and possibly boring descriptions. You won't find any moe or anything of the sort! They're here to complete the FMP! world's story. Even though the book is almost finished, please let me expand upon the background of our stories in this longish afterword.

[Voice from the North]

This story is about the past of Kalinin and Sousuke. I did not really have the chance before to explain in what ways the parallel universe of FMP! differs from our own. The further back you go in history, the more it becomes like our own, which is the reason why I had to bring in the story of Kalinin with a quite realistic approach to it. Otherwise people would say that new villains start appearing in the series like it was another Fujimi fantasy novel. If truth be told, this kind of story is even easier to write for me personally.

Also, I confess that I'm not the type of writer who likes to describe violence and gore. Even injuries to the human body related to all the different weapons I mention, I chose not to spend too much time describing realistically. Those of the readers who would want to know more about plane crashes and their gruesome consequences, I redirect to a book called "Crash victims" (published by Kodansha), which is an excellent non-fiction work on the autopsies of victims of Japan Airlines crashes. After reading it, all those exploding planes and robots in anime and games won't be so fun anymore.

Now, let us turn our attention to the divergence of the FMP! world history, and ours. In the second half of the 80's Kalinin returns to Afghanistan, and the USSR would later capture the country entirely, and the Taliban movement wouldn't be born. By the way, sorry for killing you at my own convenience, Gorbachev-san and Alksnis-san...

With the situation being so different in Afghanistan, the power balance in the Middle East would also shift dramatically. Even the relationship between India and Pakistan may be radically different from reality. With all those differences accumulating, and being compounded by different effects of the system of international relations, a really historical investigation becomes impossible, so I left these

details vague. Well, since FMP! isn't really an alternative history simulation, I thought it'd be all right to leave it like this (...I'm just being irresponsible...)

I would not want to end this section on this somewhat sad note, so instead I'll answer some questions about Sousuke's upbringing that I've been getting since a long time, including some related to the story in this volume.

A long time ago I had decided that Sousuke would be a normal child. He'd go to Akiba to buy used PC parts, get some light novels from there and read them on his way back home - like a normal otaku kid. In the first character descriptions he wasn't particularly strong or anything, just known for being good at athletics. Of course, he then would have had some hidden natural talents, but to make him into an elite soldier required a completely different mindset, and, of course, some luck.

If I have more time later, I'd write something about the first confrontation of Sousuke and Gauron.

[Birth of TDD]

This is a story about the past of Mardukas and Tessa.

The submarines appearing in this volume - the "Turbulent", "Dallas", and the Victor-class - are all real warships. We can't be certain whether submarines like K-244 in "Voice From the North" really performed such intelligence gathering missions, but it seems that there have been incidents at sea which remained unknown to the public at large. Interested readers should take a look at "Secret Submarine Warfare" (published by Shinchosha) and "Hostile Waters" (a publication of Bungeishunju)⁵⁰.

It is well known that people like Mardukas lived and worked in that era. He, Carl and even Teresa aren't particularly good at shooting, martial arts, or any other flashy combat styles, - it's not as important for them as for Sousuke and others.

The Falklands war that Mardukas mentions, Captain Brown and his "Conqueror" are also a true story. Perhaps it was a little impudent of me to shamelessly use it like that, but I thought - why not, if it adds to the fun. Besides, real-world people often come into play in the FMP! world. In the first volume of "Owaru Day by Day", when Kurz visits his hometown and meets the tank ace, Otto Carius; he is a real person, whose life was similar to that of the famous ace Sakai Saburo. Like him, the Carius lived a peaceful life after the war (managing a pharmacy), but in fact was commanded a Tiger tank during the war (and you can get a model of him and his tank from Tamiya). But enough digressions on my part.

The gentlemen who we met here around Guam, and who called Teresa to that island, also have models in fiction and non-fiction... but let's leave it at that (uh-oh...)

⁵⁰ "Hostile Waters" is a book by Peter Huchthausen, describing the incident with the Soviet submarine K-219. It was followed by a Los-Angeles class submarine (USS Augusta), and one of its ballistic missiles detonated inside the launch shaft because of a leak (rocket fuel + water = explosive cocktail). The subsequent near-failure of its reactor, stopped by a sacrifice, almost irradiated the Gulfstream.

Which reminds me: among today's young readers many people don't know anything about the Cold War era or the Soviet Union. I don't know if I should lament it or not... Anyway, I get a lot of quizzical looks about that, and then people exclaim: "Aah, so it was like that! But how couldn't they see?.." In reality, no one in the 1980's could have imagined the Cold War ending and the Soviet Union collapsing. Looking back now, it's clear that its foundations were falling apart, but then people couldn't think of it like that. That's why ordinary people would believe rumours about them developing planes that travel at Mach 5, and completely silent submarines. And if you read 80's science-fiction, you'd still find the Soviet Union three centuries into the future. So, taking elements from that view of the world, my aim was to not make FMP! look like it was in a completely different universe.

This series was first published in 1998, and while then it was still fresh in popular memory, now, in 2006, the word "soviet" itself seems to be going to of use.

Regarding the division of China, it happened because of a civil war in the beginning of the 90's; it should be noted that in reality there was a tense situation there, which of course was even more pronounced in the FMP! world.

Finally, as to how Tessa became captain and gained the trust of her crew - well, that's something I'd like to write about, later.

[A Gluttonous Comrade]

Normally, when compiling a collection of short stories, you'd want to get all of them following the same theme, or at least mood, but here I decided to top it off with a comical story.

The tiger that you have seen in the recently published "Continuing On My Own" finds himself in a pretty bad situation here. By the way, my apologies to all readers who have not read the stories published in the magazine before and were a little surprised.

I'm sure you noticed the enormous gap in style and atmosphere of the two first stories and the last one - in fact, it's pretty jarring, isn't it... Sousuke's again in his baka-mode from most short stories. No matter what kind of past and destiny he's burdened with, you can't really sympathise with him when he's like that, can you? Well, that's all right. Besides, be happy - you haven't seen Kaname so vigorous in a while, since in the novels she has good reasons to be constantly very unhappy to say the least. You know, the author's frustrations also build up over time!!

Well, that's about it. Err, what else is there... Well, let's recap what's been happening recently.

The third volume of Ueda Hiroshi-san's "FMP! Sigma" was published last month, and there's a cute picture of Tessa holding Bonta-kun on the cover. There's a DVD, high-quality as usual, bundled with the volume. This is an important point in the serialisation of this work in the "Dragon Age" magazine.

A little before that, the TSR OVA "A Relatively Leisurely Day in the Life of a Fleet Captain" came out. There's plenty of fanservice for admirers of Tessa-tan, and something about the daily life of everyone from Mithril. It's been selling well, too.

So yeah, I asked Takemoto-san from KyoAni to pay special attention to Tessa's shower scene, and he did it perfectly! In that quality - that was intense! Couldn't help noticing that my name in the credits was just above her ass though (seriously, watch that episode). I was compiling the fifth book at the time, and came rushing to the studio then. Seeing my name there, I protested to the staff:

- Hey, what's that?! You guys can laugh all you want, but if my name stays there, all the thirty billion Tessa fans are going to come after me, because they'll think I intentionally put it there! They'll throw eggs at me at Narita Airport! Come on, please, do something about it!

But apparently it was too late, and there were technical reasons, and they said they couldn't do anything. They should really do a creditless DVD release then, no other way!

Yeah, just kidding. Kyoto Animation did a wonderful job, and I would like to thank them again.

Oh, and speaking of them, they let me help a little with their incredibly successful "Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya"! Because the staff was overworked and couldn't spare a moment, I helped them by playing with Kuroi-san... ok, I'll stop joking around - worked on the scenario, actually. Kuroi-san is the cat of the KyoAni staff, by the way, and seems to be the most important person in the studio.

... So, where was I? Oh yes. The next main novel after "Burning One Man Force", that is, "Come Make My Day" is now being serialised in "Dragon Magazine". Everyone from the "Danaan" is back, and the story is reaching its climax!

Also, the other day, I was talking to Ebikawa Kanetake about the design of the ARX-8. What a conversation, too...

Me: Yeah, I really think that if we can, we should give him MAP weapons...

Ebi: MAP weapons? *sweatdrop*

Me: Since it can't fly, MAP weapons would be way better. Let's make it look like SoraA, eh?

Ebi: SoraA... *large sweatdrop*

Me: Move and attack range should be at least 6. More than 5000 attack points, too. And 4 slots of reinforcements.

Ebi: Can I go home now? *rivers of sweat*

Ah, sorry, kidding you again. I just wanted to say that Super Robot Wars is awesome. And I didn't even plan for this machine to appear in combat just yet.

Anyway, to all the staff, and most of all my readers, - thank you very much.

'Til next time, then...

Shoji Gato

June 2006.

[Appendix A]

-Short timeline of the FMP! world-

1979 - [December] - Kalinin participates in the beginning of the intervention in Afghanistan, in Operation Storm-333 (assault on Tajbeg Palace)

1981 - [Dec 24] - Whispered born

1982 - [April-June] Falklands conflict; Mardukas on the HMS "Conqueror"

1983(?) - "Alaskan prodigy" reported in the news, disappears; AS development begins (most probably)

1984 - Kalinin returns to Afghanistan for the second time (a year before his K-244 mission)

1985 - Kalinin on the Victor-III sub K-244 picks up Sousuke (reported as around 4 years old); gets chased by the "Turbulent", which then stops for repairs and chases Soviet Delta-IV, meets the "Dallas"; 1986 - [beginning/middle] Mardukas visits the Testarossa household (Teresa/Leonard already five years old); [December] Mardukas receives Christmas card (half a year after his visit) from Testarossa saying he was transferred to Okinawa

1989 - [June 5] peaceful change of regime in Poland; [November 9-10], Berlin Wall collapses; Kalinin learns that Sousuke is being trained as part of the special unit "Knife" (and he's about eight years old)

1990 - [August] Iraq invades Kuwait;

1991 - [January 17-23] coalition forces drive Iraqis out of Kuwait; immediately after, the ECS nuke is used (before February); [half a year after the nuke] and about the time when the USSR fell in the real world, a military coup happens and Gorbachev is assassinated; Soviet troops re-enter Afghanistan possibly the same year

1992 - [before winter] Kalinin meets Sousuke in Afghanistan (he looks like he's about ten); [December?] "revolt" staged in Kabul, signal the beginning of the end for the Afghan resistance, Kalinin joins the rebels

1993 - [presumably winter; two years after the Kuwait nuke] - Mardukas gets involved in the scandal over the Trafalgar-class reactor problems, gets demoted and effectively fired from the Navy; [not a month later] learns of the deaths of Carl and Maria Testarossa and goes to investigate (finds Portsmouth "still" in the grasp of winter), gets invite to Mithril; [half a year later] joins them on Merida; soon this year or the next, meets Teresa again, on Merida (she's twelve);

1996 - [two years before the start of the show] Sousuke fighting in Southeast Asia as a mercenary.

1997 - TDD launched (a year before the events of season 1)

1998 - [April] events of the show start

General translator notes:

The translator isn't a Humanoid Interface, a professional linguist or literary genius (or even a native English speaker), - I really don't have the right to say "Supeshalisuto da!", like Sousuke. Therefore, I'm aware of the fact that there may be mistakes, especially stylistic. Keep in mind that I had to find a balance between a text that is pleasant to read, and the original content. I try my best, but so some awkward expressions do sneak in, as if covered by an ECS field (though, actually, it might just be my tired eyes). For improvements, suggestions, etc., refer to Disclaimer para II.

[Disclaimer]

I. This translation is made by fans, for fans. It is also made for educational purposes - yes, you heard me right. It is first and foremost an exercise in translation for me, which happens to be a light novel from a series that I like. Therefore, it is definitely not for sale, rent or auction, and will remain free.

II. Any negative feedback - or, better, constructive criticism, - will definitely be considered, and a v2 is a definite possibility. I don't mind going over it again and adding a layer of polish. Mondai nai. Although new and/or ongoing translations do have priority.

III. If you want to show your support for GatoH-sensei and KyoAni - buy the books and DVDs.

IV. This content is published a "right to copy" license, 2009-2010. Spread it around! However, if you want to use the translation as a basis for another translation (in your native language, for example), please contact me first at: emperor3261 (at) gmail.com ; the LJ account where I post them initially is <http://xmistervx.livejournal.com/>

I'm definitely going to allow and encourage it, I'd just like to keep track of its usage, so please do.

V. Finally, by reading this, you will agree to wait impatiently for the next season of Full Metal Panic! and share the goodness of the existing FMP material with others.

Thanks to:

Gatoh Shoji - for creating one of the most attractive fictional worlds out there;

Gonzo, and (especially) KyoAni - for bringing it to life;

lazy-otaku - the quality scans;

My friend T. - editing and important advice;

And You! yes, I mean you! - for reading it, which proves that the time I spent on this wasn't wasted.

General thanks to:

The people who share - whether it's files, or your time and knowledge - you make the world a better place.

Please look forward to our next releases!

(...which may or may not include the two new novels, depending on circumstances - but in any case, short story translation will probably continue...)